

# In Search of a Structurally Complete Epistemology of Essence

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**Abstract:** A very influential idea in the epistemology of modality is that we acquire knowledge of metaphysical modality through knowledge of essence. As a consequence, the epistemology of essence becomes crucial in the attempt to answer the question of how we come to know modal propositions. In this paper I investigate Lowe’s and Hale’s approach to the epistemology of essence and argue that both of them remain in a crucial, *structural* sense incomplete. Systematizing this criticism against Lowe and Hale, I then break down desiderata of what I call a *structurally complete* picture of the epistemology of essence. Finally, I discuss Husserl’s epistemology of essence and defend it against a notorious objection. However, Husserl’s approach also seems to remain incomplete, due to its appeal to imagination, which operates on the basis of background assumptions that are themselves in need of justification. I indicate, however, that a Husserlian theory of intuitive awareness of universals might supply us with (direct) justification of these background assumptions and, hence, that we might be able to paint a structurally complete picture of the epistemology of essence with Husserlian means.

**Keywords:** Epistemology, Essence, Modality, Imagination, Intuition, Lowe, Hale, Husserl

## Introduction

There are two different kinds of answers to the question of how we acquire knowledge of modality (i.e. knowledge of necessity and possibility):

- (MC) One can either appeal to specific *mental capacities* (like conceiving, imagining, intuiting, perceiving, ...) that provide us with warrant for beliefs about modality; or
- (SM) one can *ground* knowledge of modality *in knowledge of some other subject matter* SM, arguing that it is in virtue of knowledge of SM that we come to have modal knowledge.

In this paper I investigate a particular, very influential (SM)-type answer to the central question in the epistemology of modality. According to essence-based accounts we come to have modal knowledge in virtue of having knowledge of *essences*. Such an account has to answer two crucial questions:

- (i) *Transition Question*: How exactly does the *transition* from knowledge of essence to knowledge of modality work?
- (ii) *Source Question*: How do we acquire knowledge of essence in the first place?

This paper focuses on (ii), the source question. With regard to (ii) one can, again, give a respective (MC)-type answer, appealing to some mental capacities, or a respective (SM)-type answer,

grounding knowledge of essence in knowledge of something else. Looking at the two most influential essence-based accounts on the market, E. J. Lowe's and Bob Hale's, I argue that both deliver pictures of the epistemology of modality that are in a crucial, *structural* sense *incomplete*.

In a section called *The Road Map*, I systematize the critical discussion of Lowe and Hale by breaking down general, *structural* desiderata a complete picture of the epistemology of essence should fulfill. Concerning the epistemology of *essence*, we can, again, either take the (SM)-route, grounding knowledge of essence in knowledge of some subject matter, SM1, or the (MC)-route, identifying one or more mental capacities that give(s) us knowledge of essence. Since any (SM)-style answer in the epistemology of essence will raise a question about how we know the subject matter, SM1, in the knowledge of which we have grounded knowledge of essence, (SM)-style answers *all the way down* will be problematic on pain of a vicious infinite regress. That is to say that since (SM)-style answers prompt (ii)-type follow-up questions (source questions), we cannot *always* meet (ii)-type follow-up questions with (SM)-style answers. (SM)-style answers all the way down would just infinitely push the bump under the rug. Hence, at some point in the justificatory chain, or so I shall argue, there needs to be appeal to some (MC)-type answer to a (ii)-type follow-up question. What is more, I argue that not any (MC)-type answer will do the trick. The foundationalist's (MC)-type answer will have to appeal to *directly justifying* mental capacities. From this it should be clear that the notion of *structural completeness*, which is to be developed in detail in *The Road Map*, does not concern completeness in scope but rather completeness concerning the justificatory story an account tells. In other words, an account in the epistemology of essences is *complete* in the *structural* sense, not if it is able to account for the entire scope of essentialist knowledge but if it paints a map all the way down to the end of the justificatory or explanatory road for those pieces of essentialist knowledge it tackles.

With these desiderata and the notion of structural completeness in hand, I discuss Edmund Husserl's (1973) epistemology of essence, which gives an (MC)-type answer to the source question (ii) by appealing to *imagination*. Exploring a crucial problem this account faces, it becomes obvious that imagination (at least as it is applied here) is *not* a directly justifying mental capacity. Hence, the Husserlian appeal to imagination also falls short of providing a *structurally complete* account of the epistemology of essence. I argue, however, that supplying this imagination-based account with a broadly Husserlian epistemology of universals can yield a structurally complete picture of the epistemology of essence. This is due to the fact that Husserlian epistemology of universals assigns a central role to *intuition*—a mental capacity that fits the bill of being directly justifying. Finally, I provide some concluding remarks.

## **Lowe's Epistemology of Essence**

It seems that Lowe has a pretty straightforward answer to the question of how our *epistemology of essence* works. Following Fine (1994), he takes the essence of a thing  $x$  to simply be what it is for  $x$  to be. In this sense, the essence of  $x$  is given by the *real definition* of  $x$ . So, to Lowe, it is plausible, and *sufficient*, to say that we know the essence of  $x$  simply by *understanding what  $x$  is*. Lowe (2012: 944) gives a transcendental argument aiming to establish *that* we have essentialist knowledge:

Knowing an entity's essence is simply knowing *what that entity is*. And at least in the case of *some* entities, we must be able to know *what they are*, because otherwise it would be hard to see how we could know anything at all about them.<sup>1</sup> (Lowe 2012: 944)

Note that, if successful, this transcendental argument establishes *that* we have knowledge of essence (in some cases). It does not, however, tell us *how* we come to know essentialist propositions. Yet, this was the question. Really all Lowe can be taken to offer in answer to the latter question is that we know the essence of  $x$  by understanding what  $x$  is. This answer, however, immediately raises the question of *how* we understand what  $x$  is. It is not the case that Lowe's epistemological story ends here. However, as Vaidya (2018: 232) correctly observes, Lowe's theory of our knowledge of essence "for the most part is given by his theory of what essences are, what real definitions are, and what prospects there are for real definitions across different types of entities". That is to say that Lowe offers some considerations as to how much of an entity's essence one needs to know or understand for the resulting modal judgements about that entity to be reliable. So, Lowe offers some *quantitative* considerations about our understanding of *what  $x$  is* in relation to modal judgments about  $x$ . To illustrate, take the following of Lowe's examples. Lowe (2012: 939-40) argues that even if there is no complete verbal definition to be had of entities like a bronze statue and a lump of bronze, we have *enough* grasp on the essences or real definitions of those entities to conclude that they can coincide spatiotemporally and yet be numerically distinct.<sup>2</sup>

I take it, however, that the question of *how* we understand what  $x$  is remains largely unanswered without any *qualitative* considerations about *how* any quantity of understanding of *what some  $x$  is* could come about. Lowe's account remains short on such qualitative considerations.

With regard to the framework of possible kinds of answers to the source question, (ii), which I have offered above, Lowe can be taken to offer an (MC)-type answer to (ii). He appeals to the mental capacity of rationally understanding (what  $x$  is). Yet, Lowe does not satisfactorily answer the follow-up question of how understanding *what some  $x$  is* is supposed to work exactly.<sup>3</sup> It is for that reason that Lowe's answer to (ii) seems unsatisfactory and incomplete; it does not take us very far down the explanatory road. Let's see if Hale's account fares better.

## Hale's Epistemology of Essence

### *A Priori Knowledge of Essence*

Hale considers both, *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge of essence.<sup>4</sup> I will briefly sketch his views on both. Hale gives an (SM)-type answer with regard to *a priori* knowledge of essence. He thinks that *a priori* knowledge of essence is ultimately grounded in *knowledge of meaning*. To connect essence to meaning it is useful to look at the difference between real and nominal definition(s): while real

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<sup>1</sup> A more elaborated version of this argument can be found in Lowe (2008: 35-36). See also Sgaravatti (2016) for criticism of this argument.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Lowe (2012: 940) recognizes that this example is controversial. He concedes that there is substantive disagreement concerning the modal profile of entities like statues and lumps and the possibility of such numerically distinct entities to coincide. However, Lowe holds that this stems from the fact that there is substantive disagreement concerning the *essence* of such entities.

<sup>3</sup> Maybe Lowe thinks that we have *primitive* understanding of what  $x$  is. Note, however, that he does not provide an argument for this claim.

<sup>4</sup> For a somewhat different discussion of this distinction see e.g. Tahko (2017, 2018). For a view that considers knowledge of essence to be typically a *posteriori*, see Mallozzi (2021).

definition is the definition of a *thing*, nominal definition is the definition of a *word* for a thing. Hale (2013: 254) emphasizes that in some cases the real and nominal definition of some  $x$ —even though they are not identical—can be given by using the same words. For Hale these are “[c]lear and straightforward cases in which knowledge of meaning suffices for knowledge of essence”. These clear cases are the ones where we are able to give an *explicit definition of a word*, i.e. where we are able to state analytically necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the word. Here is Hale’s example for such a straight-forward case where knowledge of meaning suffices for knowledge of essence: If we know that a plane figure is correctly described as ‘square’ iff it is made up of four straight sides of equal length, meeting at right-angles, we know the essence of a square, i.e. the definition of the thing square, by knowing the (nominal) definition of the word ‘square’. In such cases Hale takes the essence to be *transparent*.

Note, however, that Hale does not build his entire case for grounding the knowledge of essence in the knowledge of meaning on these rare examples where essences are transparent. He (2013: 256) considers cases where the essence is less transparent. For some—arguably most—words it is quite hard to give *explicit* definitions, i.e. to state analytically necessary and sufficient conditions for their application. So, for most words we might only be able to give some form of *implicit* definition. Hale even considers basic or fundamental concepts, like basic logical words, that cannot be defined at all. However he holds that also in these less transparent cases, knowledge of the meaning of the words grounds knowledge of the essence of the things they denote: Even though the basic logical word ‘and’ cannot be defined at all “knowing what [the word] ‘and’ means is sufficient for knowledge of the essence of truth-functional conjunction” (Hale 2013: 258).

It is plausible that an account in the epistemology of essence that grounds knowledge of essence in knowledge of meaning faces the same kind of follow up questions than an account in the epistemology of modality that grounds knowledge of modality in knowledge of essence. For Hale’s picture of how we acquire *a priori* knowledge of essence to be complete, we need a story about how exactly the *transition* between knowledge of meaning and knowledge of essence works and a story of how exactly we acquire knowledge of meaning. Does Hale’s account provide those stories in a satisfactory way?

Concerning the transition between knowledge of meaning and knowledge of essence, Hale merely remarks that in both cases, the transparent and the non-transparent ones, knowledge of meaning *suffices* for knowledge of essence. On the face of it, this should be especially obvious in the transparent cases. There is, however, a worry one might have about the transition between knowledge of meaning and knowledge of essence on these transparent cases: Suppose the essence of square is transparent in Hale’s sense, i.e. that the nominal definition of ‘square’ and the real definition of square can be given by using the same words. So, we are in a position to know the essence of square by knowing the meaning of ‘square’. However, one might think that in order to actually come to know the essence of square in that way, one needs to *know* (or at least have some justification for believing) *that* the essence of square is transparent in that sense. The point here is that knowing the real definition is one thing, knowing *that* it is the real definition is another.<sup>5</sup> One might worry that in order for a subject  $S$  to *realize* that the essence of  $x$  is transparent in that way (i.e. that the real definition of  $x$  can be given by using the same words as the nominal definition of ‘ $x$ ’),  $S$  has to have some knowledge (or justified belief) about the essence of  $x$  already.<sup>6</sup> If we take (ii) to be the question of how we come to know the essence of some  $x$  *qua essence*, i.e. how we come

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<sup>5</sup> See Vaidya & Wallner (2021: §6) for further discussion of this distinction within the epistemology of modality.

<sup>6</sup> I suspect that the epistemic externalist will be less moved by this worry than someone with more internalist leanings.

to know *that* some proposition (or property) is essential to  $x$ , then the mere fact that some essences are transparent will not suffice for an answer. We would also have to be given a way to tell the transparent ones from the non-transparent ones. That is to say that an answer to (ii) must not only contain a story of how we come to know the real definition but also a story of how we come to know *that* it is the real definition. The complaint then is that in transparent cases it does *not suffice* to know the meaning, i.e. the nominal definition, of the word to know the essence, i.e. the real definition, of the thing. We also have to know *that* we are dealing with a transparent case.

One might think that Hale's claim that knowledge of meaning suffices for knowledge of essence is less problematic in the *non-transparent* cases. Remember Hale's example: Even though the basic logical word 'and' cannot be defined at all "knowing what [the word] 'and' means is sufficient for knowledge of the essence of truth-functional conjunction" (Hale 2013: 258). I take it that this *seems* less problematic than the transparent cases for there is no explicit definition to be had such that we could neatly separate knowing the definition from knowing *that* it is the real definition. Both these points are in a sense lumped together in the implicit grasp of the meaning of the word 'and'. The analogous worry, however, is that this implicit grasp of meaning might *presuppose* some essentialist knowledge. Hale seems to be aware of this point.

If words are individuated semantically, rather than merely phonetically or typographically, facts about their meanings are essential to them, so that knowledge of word meanings is just a special case of knowledge of essence. If knowledge of meanings were a priori, there would have to be some a priori knowledge of essence that is not mediated by knowledge of meaning, on pain of apparently vicious circularity. But it is much more plausible that knowledge of meaning is a pre-condition for a priori knowledge in general, and is itself acquired a posteriori. With much regret, I must defer further discussion of these questions to another occasion. (Hale 2013: 258-259)

To be perfectly clear, taking knowledge of meaning to be acquired *a posteriori* does not get Hale's account out of the woods. Even if we grant that knowledge of meaning is *a posteriori*, the assumption that words are individuated semantically is still bad for Hale's account. Semantic individuation of words would make knowledge of meaning itself knowledge of essence, as Hale concedes. On this picture, (*a priori*) knowledge of essence would be grounded in (*a posteriori*) knowledge of essence, which does not get us anywhere if we seek to answer (ii).<sup>7</sup> So, the crucial question for Hale's account is whether or not words are individuated semantically. Both, the story of how knowledge of meaning works and the story of how exactly the transition between knowledge of meaning and knowledge of essence works crucially depend on these points, the discussion of which Hale defers to a different occasion. Hence, Hale's overall account of *a priori* knowledge of essence remains crucially *incomplete* because it does not sufficiently answer or address the follow up question about the knowledge of meaning and the *transition* between knowledge of meaning and knowledge of essence.

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<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this view would make it unclear as to whether we are really dealing with *a priori* knowledge of essence here.

## *A Posteriori Knowledge of Essence*

I will now turn to Hale’s account of *a posteriori knowledge* of essence. Here Hale is guided by the Kripkean inference model in the epistemology of modality: According to Kripke we can know some necessities *a posteriori* by the following inference model:

- (K1) S knows / has justified belief that  $p \rightarrow \Box p$  (*a priori*)  
 (K2) S knows / has justified belief that  $p$  (*a posteriori*)  
 ∴  
 (K3) S knows / has justified belief that  $\Box p$  (*a posteriori*)

Kripke’s idea is that since one of the premises is known *a posteriori*, the conclusion is known *a posteriori* as well. Hale’s strategy is to adopt this Kripkean deduction model for his epistemology of *essence*.

In a nutshell, that strategy consists in formulating and arguing for general principles of essence—principles asserting, schematically, that such-and-such a property is essential to its instances—from which we may infer specific Kripke conditionals which, in their turn, may serve as the major premises for Kripke-style inferences to specific essentialist conclusions. (Hale 2013: 269)

This is what Hale’s deduction model in the epistemology of essence looks like.

- (H1) S knows / has justified belief that  $Fx \rightarrow \Box_x Fx$  (*a priori*)  
 (H2) S knows / has justified belief that  $Fx$  (*a posteriori*)  
 ∴  
 (H3) S knows / has justified belief that  $\Box_x Fx$  (*a posteriori*)<sup>8</sup>

Hale is offering an (SM)-type account, grounding knowledge of essence in knowledge of (H1)-type principles of essences from which the former is to be deduced. In what follows, I will critically reflect on the viability of this approach, especially concerning the issue of structural completeness.

Similar to Kripke, Hale takes knowledge of *essence* in (H3) to be *a posteriori* for it is derived from at least one *a posteriori* premise. It is plausible, however, that the way we come to know the major premise in Kripke’s deduction model, (K1), is also part of the overall story in the epistemology of modality.<sup>9</sup> Analogously, the epistemic pathway to the major premise in Hale’s deduction model, (H1), is part of the overall story in the epistemology of *essence*. I take it that the story of how we come to know the *major premise* in these deduction models is in fact the *most interesting* part of the respective epistemology.<sup>10</sup> On this picture, thus, the most interesting bit of the *a posteriori* part of Hale’s epistemology of essence are the *a priori* arguments for principles of the

<sup>8</sup> From there Hale goes on to argue for the following inference model in the epistemology of modality:

- (H3) S knows / has justified belief that  $\Box_x Fx$  (*a posteriori*)  
 (H4) S knows / has justified belief that  $\Box_x Fx \rightarrow \Box Fx$  (*a priori*)  
 ∴  
 (H5) S knows / has justified belief that  $\Box Fx$  (*a posteriori*)

See Vaidya (2018) for discussion.

<sup>9</sup> For Casullo (2012: 284) knowing (K1) amounts to knowing the “general modal status” of  $p$ .

<sup>10</sup> This concurs with Hale’s (2013: 269) own verdict that “the most interesting question here concerns which such general principles [of essence] may be established”.

form of (H1). I do not intend to harp on about the *a priori vs. a posteriori* issue. Instead, the point I want to make is that Hale seems to tacitly presuppose some knowledge of essence in his case for (at least) one of the (H1)-type principles of essence he seeks to establish. If this is true, Hale's deduction model of the epistemology of essence is crucially incomplete. The principle in question is called *Kind membership* (KM):

(KM) Any object is essentially an object of a certain kind.

Hale doubts that this principle admits of strict proof, but he still makes a case that there is sufficient reason to accept it. I cannot rehearse this case in full detail. To make my point, however, it suffices to discuss one crucial thread of Hale's argument. For (KM) to not be obviously false, the principle cannot range over all kinds. Very roughly, for Hale (2013: 270-271) being of a certain kind is a *sortal property*. Sortal properties are determined by *sortal concepts*, which are expressed by *sortal predicates*.<sup>11</sup> While the sortal concept *horse* determines a kind, membership of which is plausibly essential to its instances, the sortal concept *horse owned by the Queen* does not. It is plausible that for any horse owned by the Queen, belonging to the kind *horse owned by the Queen* is *not essential* to it. (Hale 2013: 271) So, for the principle of (KM) to be plausible, the notion of kind in it has to be restricted to those that are determined by what Hale calls *pure sortals*.

Yet, how can we distinguish pure sortals from the impure ones? To simply answer that the former are those that are essential to the objects that instantiate them would amount to question-begging. Hale considers the possibility of characterizing pure sortals as those that are not themselves restrictions of others. This works for our example, since the plausibly impure sortal *horse owned by the Queen* can be understood as a restriction of the plausibly pure sortal *horse*. However, so the objection goes, the sortal *horse* can be understood as a restriction of the sortal *animal*, which in turn is a restriction of the sortal *organism*. Hence, characterizing pure sortals as those that are not restrictions of other sortals would crucially under-generate pure sortals, for it is plausible that *horse* and *animal* are pure sortals. Hale takes the point of this objection but believes that there is room for an appropriate refinement of his characterization of pure sortals. He takes note of a crucial distinction in the way in which *horse owned by the Queen* is a restriction of *horse* and the way in which *horse* is a restriction of *animal*. While *horse owned by the Queen* is a *mere semantic* restriction of *horse*, *horse* is a *natural*, and not merely semantic, restriction of *animal*. (Hale 2013: 273) Accordingly, pure sortals are those that are not merely semantic restrictions of other sortals. So, in order to be able to tell the pure sortals from impure ones we have to be able to distinguish merely semantic from *natural*, not merely semantic, restrictions. I take it, however, that *natural* restrictions (as opposed to merely semantic ones) are those that hold (not in virtue of the meaning of the terms involved but) in virtue of the *nature* (or *essence*) of the respective sortals or kinds involved. On this picture, distinguishing pure from impure sortals, which is crucial for Hale's case for (KM), requires essentialist information and Hale's account is guilty of begging the question.

I think that Hale (2013: 270-271) is ultimately aware of this when he doubts that there is a non-question-begging proof for (KM). The moral to be drawn from this is *not* that Hale's reasoning concerning (KM) does not illuminate the principle or give us reason to believe in it. I think that Hale is indeed successful in this regard. The moral here is rather that the epistemology of essences *cannot* take its *start* in inferring essentialist propositions from general principles about essence, for,

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<sup>11</sup> "A *sortal* concept is more usually characterized as one which differs from other, merely adjectival, concepts by its being associated with conditions or criteria of *identity*, as well as conditions or criteria of *application*." (Hale 2013: 271)

at least in this case, the argument for the respective principle *presupposes* essentialist knowledge of some sort.<sup>12</sup> A complete story of the epistemology of essence has to begin earlier, so to speak. In the worst case, Hale's deduction model of the epistemology of essence is guilty of question-begging; in the best case, it can only offer us an incomplete account of how we come to know essences.

## The Road Map

I will now try to synthesize the critical points made so far, in order to get a more systematic picture of the possible routes in the epistemology of essence and the respective desiderata on each route. I have argued that both Lowe's and Hale's account of the epistemology of essence are in a crucial sense incomplete. Metaphorically speaking, none of these accounts takes us all the way down the explanatory (or justificatory) road. The purpose of this section, to stay in the metaphor, is to chart out the winding paths of the epistemology of essence and draw a map to see what could await us at the end of the explanatory road. Less metaphorically put, the aim is to determine, at least in principle and as generally as possible, what a *structurally complete* picture of the epistemology of essence would have to look like.

Remember, I started out distinguishing two kinds of answers to the question of how we acquire *modal* knowledge? While (MC)-type answers appeal to mental capacities, the essentialist account in the epistemology of modality gives an (SM)-type answer, grounding the knowledge of modality in the knowledge of *essence*. As I said, such an account faces two follow up questions; one about the *transition* of knowledge of essence and knowledge of modality (i), and one about how we come to know essences in the first place (ii). This picture is completely general. It applies equally to the epistemology of *essence*. So, again the question of how we come to know essentialist propositions can be given two different answers:

- (MC) One can appeal to specific mental capacities (e.g. conceiving, imagining, perception, intuition, ...) that provide us with warrant for beliefs about essence; or
- (SM) one can *ground* knowledge of essence *in knowledge of some other subject matter* SM, arguing that it is in virtue of knowledge of SM that we come to have essentialist knowledge.

Both kinds of answers raise follow-up questions:

- (MC.i) *Framing Question*: How exactly does applying these mental capacities work to yield modal or essentialist knowledge?
- (SM.i) *Transition Question*: How does the *transition* between knowledge of SM and knowledge of essence work?
- (SM.ii) *Source Question*: How do we acquire knowledge of SM in the first place?

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<sup>12</sup> Note that this argument is specifically about (KM). Hence, it does not show that no principle of essence can be known without presupposing some essentialist knowledge. It does show, however, that Hale's account of our knowledge of essences is incomplete.

Lowe's (MC)-type answer in the epistemology of essence is ultimately incomplete for it fails to answer or adequately address the follow-up question (MC.i). Hale's (SM)-type account only offers a partial picture of the epistemology of essence because he falls short of fully addressing and answering the follow-up questions (SM.i) and (SM.ii). However, it is not my intention to point fingers here. Instead, I wish to make a positive and more general point. The critical discussion of Lowe and Hale can teach us something about what a structurally complete picture of the epistemology of essence would have to look like. Supplying answers to the respective follow up questions of (MC)- and (SM)-type approaches is a desideratum a complete account of the epistemology of essence should fulfill. This means that no (SM)-type story in the epistemology of essence is structurally complete without answering (SM.i) and (SM.ii), i.e., as we called them, the *transition question* and the *source question*. But, again, there are two different kinds of answers to (SM.ii): (MC)-style and (SM)-style answers. Suppose that we give an (SM)-style answer to (SM.ii), grounding knowledge of SM in knowledge of SM1. This would prompt another (SM.ii)-type follow up question about the epistemology of SM1. No (SM)-type answer would ever end the chain of (SM.ii)-type follow up questions. We cannot satisfactorily answer source questions by pointing at more sources indefinitely. So, in order to prevent a vicious infinite regress, eventually, at some point in this chain, we will have to give an (MC)-type answer, alluding to some specific mental operations or capacities that provide warrant for beliefs about the respective subject matter.<sup>13</sup> Since (MC)-type accounts prompt (MC.i)-type follow-up questions, no story in the epistemology of essence is complete without an answer to some (MC.i)-type question.

Somewhat more formally, the argument runs as follows.

- (1) We can either give an (MC)-type answer or an (SM)-type answer to the question of how we come to know some subject matter (like modality or essence).
- (2) Any (MC)-type answer will prompt an (MC.i)-type follow-up question.
- (3) Any (SM)-type answer will prompt (SM.i)- and (SM.ii)-type follow-up questions (i.e. transition questions and source questions).
- (4) For the respective answers to the question of how we come to know some subject matter (like modality or essence) to be complete all follow-up questions need to be answered.<sup>14</sup>
- (5) Since (SM)-type answers prompt (SM.ii)-type follow-up questions (i.e. source questions), (SM)-style answers *all the way down* must be incomplete on pain of a vicious infinite regress.
- (6) Hence, for a *structurally* complete story, eventually (at some point in the chain) we must appeal to an (MC)-style answer.

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<sup>13</sup> This, of course, presupposes that (MC)- and (SM)-type answers exhaust the class of possible answers to questions like how we come to have knowledge of some subject matter SM.

<sup>14</sup> Views according to which knowledge of some subject matter is primitive might be seen to disagree with this premise. Perhaps, according to the primitivist about some subject matter SM\*, we cannot tell a story how we come to know SM\*, so there is no answer to an (SM.ii)-type follow-up question and (4) needs to be rejected. I take it, however, that such a primitivist owes us a story about why knowledge of SM\* is primitive, i.e. a story about why there is no answer to the respective (SM.ii)-type follow-up question. Nevertheless, this story might not appeal to a mental capacity but maybe only to the fact that knowledge of SM\* is innate. So, adopting primitivism about some relevant subject matter here might be a way to block the conclusion in (7). In response, I am inclined to weaken my point to the claim that any *non-primitivist* answer to the question of how we come to know some subject matter (like modality or essence) is complete without an answer to some (MC.i)-type question. Thanks to Anand Vaidya for making me aware of this.

- (7) Since (MC)-style answers prompt (MC.i)-type follow-up questions, no answer to the question of how we come to know some subject matter (like modality or essence) is complete without an answer to some (MC.i)-type question.

So, these structural considerations about the two different ways to answer the question of how we come to know essences are able to put a general constraint on any structurally complete answer to this question. If we want to go all the way down the explanatory or justificatory road, we will, eventually, have to appeal to some mental capacities and explain how their application exactly works to yield knowledge of the respective subject matter SM. I think that similar considerations lead us to an additional constraint: Roughly put, not any mental capacity we can plug into an (MC)-type answer will do the trick. Ultimately, we will have to appeal to a *directly justifying* mental capacity or operation. But when exactly does a mental capacity qualify as directly justifying?

- (DJ) A mental capacity or operation, C, is directly (or immediately) justifying only if the respective belief yielded by applying C does not *epistemically* depend on some further (background) belief.

Pryor (2005: 183) rightly emphasizes that “the fact that you have immediate justification to believe P does not entail that no other beliefs are required for you to be able to form or entertain the belief that P”. However, in order for you to have direct or immediate justification for P, P cannot depend on some further belief *for its justification*. That is to say, P cannot *epistemically* depend on some further belief. Correspondingly, a mental capacity, C, is directly justifying only if the belief yielded by applying C is not in need of *epistemic* support by anything other than the underlying experience of applying C.<sup>15</sup>

So, the kind of mental capacity appealed to in an (MC)-type answer matters for structural completeness. The respective belief yielded by the application of a *non-directly* justifying mental capacity would *epistemically* depend for its justification on some further (background) assumptions that are themselves in need of justification. Hence, appealing to a non-directly justifying mental capacity in an (MC)-type answer, we will not arrive at the end of the explanatory or, as it were, *justificatory* road.

My discussion of Husserl’s account of the epistemology of essence will put some more flesh on these rather abstract issues. There I will argue that, *imagination* (at least as it is employed in Husserl) is not a directly justifying mental capacity, for the beliefs about essence we arrive at on the basis of imagination in Husserl epistemically depend for their justification on prior assumptions that are themselves in need of justification. Before I’ll get to that, however, let me mention two clarifications or disclaimers about this road map and the requirements for a structurally complete account in the epistemology of essence that come from it.

*First*, I do not mean to suggest that no account in the epistemology of essence that falls short of being complete in this sense is useful. I have already said that I take Lowe’s and Hale’s accounts to be very illuminating about many issues. Of course, a partial answer is better than no answer. I take it, however, that breaking down the general desiderata of a structurally complete account of the epistemology of essence is a desideratum in itself.

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<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, see, e.g., Berghofer (2018, 2020). Note that Berghofer speaks of *experiences* being immediately justifying. I expand his account in order to talk about mental capacities being directly (or immediately) justifying.

*Second*, the road map paints a *foundationalist* picture. This is most probably because the author of the map was tacitly presupposing a broadly foundationalist picture of epistemology in general. It is a very interesting question of what the roadmap of the epistemology of essence would look like on a coherentist or infinitist picture. Unfortunately, I am unable to address this question in this paper. However, I wish to make the foundationalist assumption explicit by premising my argument here on (some suitable kind of) epistemic foundationalism.

## Husserl's Epistemology of Essence

### *Eidetic Variation (EV)*

Husserl, like Lowe and Hale, defends an essentialist (SM)-type account in the epistemology of *modality*. He thinks that we have modal knowledge in virtue of having knowledge of essence. So, his account of how we know about modality is also subject to (SM)-type follow up questions about the *transition* between essentialist and modal knowledge and about how we come to know essences in the first place. As stated in Section "Introduction", in this paper I am going to concentrate on the latter question.<sup>16</sup> So, what is Husserl's epistemology of *essence*? How is it, according to Husserl, that we acquire epistemic access or knowledge of essences?

Husserl's (MC)-type answer in the epistemology of *essence* has it that we are able to, as he sometimes puts it, 'see' or intuit the essence of an object of a particular kind by varying the object in *imagination*. By imaginatively producing variants of the object under consideration we will eventually be presented with an invariant structure that acts as a restraint upon the arbitrary variations (Mohanty 1991: 264). As soon as this invariant structure becomes evident, we have intuited the essence of the object *qua* member of a particular kind. This is roughly the gist of Husserl's (in)famous method of eidetic variation (EV) and 'eidetic seeing'. It helps to give a model of EV. I will discern four crucial steps of EV and then discuss the intricacies of each step in turn:

- (Step 1) Start with an example of a particular *object of a specific kind* that you have experienced or imagined.
- (Step 2) Turn it into an *arbitrary example of that kind* (i.e. into a guiding model).
- (Step 3) Start *voluntarily* and *arbitrarily* varying the arbitrary example (i.e. the guiding model) in imagination by varying an arbitrary feature of the original, i.e. the guiding example.
- (Step 4) Eventually, a unity (an invariant structure) becomes evident in the multiplicity of variants; a general form without which an object of the kind in question cannot be intuitively imagined as such. Apprehending this unity, i.e. this invariant structure is intuiting ('seeing') the essence of the object *qua* example of the kind (i.e. general essence of the kind).

*Step 1:* Note that this method starts with a particular object *of a specific kind*. Correspondingly, the result, of an EV is not the essence of the object *simpliciter*, but rather the essence of the object *qua*

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<sup>16</sup> Let me just very briefly mention that while Lowe and Hale take the transition from essentialist to modal knowledge to function via *deductive inference*, there is reason to believe that a Husserlian approach regards this transition to be non-inferential. (See also fn. 19 and fn. 26.)

instance of a kind; that is to say the essence of the *object-cum-kind* (Spinelli 2016: 3) or of the *object-cum-universal* (Spinelli 2021, 149). An example might be helpful: When I start with my copy of *Experience and Judgment* as an instance of the kind ‘book’, I will end up with what essentially belongs to my copy of *Experience and Judgment* in as much as it is a book. However, if I start with my copy of *Experience and Judgment* as an instance of the kind ‘material object’, I will end up with what essentially belongs to my copy of *Experience and Judgment* in as much as it is a material object. In Husserl’s words, the first EV will present me with the *eidōs* ‘book’, the second with the *eidōs* ‘material object’. In a sense, it is really the essence of the kind that is under consideration here.<sup>17</sup>

*Step 2:* Turning the object we started with into an *arbitrary example of that kind* (i.e. into a guiding model) is not a modification of the object in question but a modification of the way this object is regarded (Kasmier 2010: 23). To stick with our example, the point is to regard my copy of *Experience and Judgment* as merely one possible instance of a kind (say, ‘material object’) among other instances of that kind. The purpose of Step 2 is to treat actualities as possibilities among other possibilities such that it becomes irrelevant that we began with an actual experience of a book.

*Step 3:* After the example has been turned into a guiding model in Step 2, Step 3 consists in running through a multiplicity of variations of this guiding model in imagination. For Husserl the notion of a guiding example has to be taken quite literally, since the variants all have to be ‘*concretely similar*’ to the original example (Husserl 1973: 341). What does that mean? All of the variants have to be concretely similar to the guiding example with respect to the *relevant* properties pertaining to the *type* under considerations, though *arbitrarily* differing in all other respects (Kasmier 2010: 23).<sup>18</sup> Two important aspects have to be mentioned here. It is important that the fabrication of the multiplicity of variants is conducted *voluntarily* and in a consciously *arbitrary* manner. This ensures that we do not need to actually produce all of the infinitely many variants to intuit the essence, i.e. to be evidently presented with the invariant structure. Due to the fact that we conduct the variation consciously in an arbitrary fashion we can come to know at a certain point in the variation that we could go on in this way, allowing us to actually stop the variation. If we know that the variants are produced arbitrarily, we can stop the variation once we have intuited the pattern that underlies the variation.

*Step 4:* Even though imagination plays a central role in EV, Step 4 makes it clear that much of the epistemic work is done by intuition. To put it in slogan form: Steps 1-3 lay out the groundwork on which we ultimately are able to ‘see’ or intuit the essence. What is this essence that we intuit on the basis of eidetic variation? It is the *eidōs* ‘*k*’, i.e. the essence of the object *qua* instance of kind *k*. This essence is presented to us as the invariant structure in the multiplicity of variants, or, as Husserl puts it, as “a necessary structure [...] [or] *necessary laws* which determine what must necessarily belong to an object in order that it can be an object of this kind” (Husserl 1973: 352). That is to say that through EV we apprehend essentialist laws about the kind under consideration. The invariant structure is given as applying to every instance of this kind. It is in that way that we come to know essentialist propositions about individual objects-cum-kinds. It is crucial to note that, according to Husserl, both the apprehension of essentialist laws and the knowledge of their application to particular instances is not acquired inferentially but intuitively.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For discussion of Husserl’s metaphysics of essences, see, e.g., Mulligan (2004), Spinelli (2016, 2021), Thomasson (2017), and Zhok (2011).

<sup>18</sup> One can already see how this motivates a certain circularity objection. More on this soon.

<sup>19</sup> This makes it plausible that the transition from essentialist to modal knowledge, on the Husserlian picture, is not inferential but intuitive. (See also fn. 16.) Essentialist and modal knowledge are thus in a sense entangled: It is by

So, Husserl gives an (MC)-type answer to the question of how we come to know essentialist propositions. He does not ground essentialist knowledge in knowledge of some different subject matter SM. Instead, his answer (directly) appeals to a mental capacity—imagination. Husserl also answers the follow up question (MC.i) by describing in detail how applying this capacity works as a means to get essentialist knowledge (EV). So, can Husserl’s EV be taken to offer a *complete* account of the epistemology of essence? Does Husserl bring us all the way down the explanatory road? Are we there yet?

I will argue in a bit that the answer is ‘No’, and that this is due to the fact that Husserl crucially appeals to a mental capacity that is not directly justifying—imagination. Before I can get to that, however, it seems that we have bigger fish to fry. One might think that the question about completeness is the least of our concerns, since EV seems to obviously contain a *vicious circle* that renders it useless as a method to acquire knowledge of essence.

### ***The Circularity Objection Against EV***

The circularity worry I am talking about concerns Step 3. I spell this worry out in detail.

- (C) How are we to recognize whether or not each variant is an instance of the type under consideration, i.e. whether or not each variant is *relevantly* similar to the guiding example? In order to be able to restrict the arbitrary imaginative variation to those variants that are *relevantly* similar, I must be able to tell variants of the type from things that do not belong to the type. If we were not acquainted with the essential features in question, we obviously could not recognize which of the imaginatively produced variants belong and which do not belong to the essence or type in question. Thus, the method presupposes the kind of knowledge that it is purported to provide access to.

This circularity problem, of course, has not gone unnoticed. In the literature on the issue, there are two different defense-strategies available.<sup>20</sup> Mohanty’s (1991) answer to the circularity charge ultimately bites the bullet. It admits the circular structure of EV. The point of this interpretation is that EV is not meant to discover new knowledge of essences, but rather to clarify our *implicit* essentialist knowledge by transforming it into *explicit* knowledge. If we consider EV in this sense as a method of *clarification* rather than discovery, the circle we are left with is rendered non-vicious. However, such an account is somewhat unsatisfactory, since it leaves open the question of how we gain *implicit* essentialist knowledge in the first place.

Kasmier (2010) argues for a different defense strategy. His way of answering the circularity objection rejects that EV must presuppose knowledge of *essences* to be able to yield knowledge of essences. Crucially, this strategy trades on the Husserlian distinction between two kinds of universals: *empirical types* and *pure essences*. It is argued that EV only requires acquaintance with the former universals (empirical types) to discover pure essences and yield modal knowledge. Kasmier claims that once we understand EV as a so-called ‘*purification*’ of an antecedently apprehended

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apprehending the essence of a kind as an essentialist law that applies to every instance of the kind that we apprehend what is necessary for every object that is an instance of that kind. (See also fn. 26.)

<sup>20</sup> See Vaidya (2010) for discussion of a somewhat different account that is very much inspired by Husserl and for a defense of this account against a similar charge.

empirical type, the circularity worry, (C), can be dispelled. In order to make sense of this strategy and of EV as a method of purifying empirical types to essences, we have to take a look at the difference between empirical types and essence and how knowledge about the former is acquired.

Both, pure essences and empirical types are universals. Pure essences are universals that exists necessarily. Empirical types are contingently existing universals. The idea of contingently existing universals is not very common in philosophy. Spinelli (2017) offers a great way to come to grips with this rather exotic Husserlian conception.<sup>21</sup> I will be returning to the contingency of empirical types in a moment. It is best, however, to start with Husserl's thoughts on the epistemology of empirical types.

For now, just think of empirical types as universals. Husserl thinks that knowledge of empirical types is brought about by *intuition*.<sup>22</sup> Here is a very rough sketch of how this intuitive awareness of universals works, according to Husserl: Suppose you are looking at two objects that are similar with regard to their color. Eventually you realize that they are of the same color, say blue. So, the two objects no longer affect you merely for themselves but as a unity. The focus of your attention is no longer directed towards the two particulars but rather towards that which makes them similar. Due to the similarity of the blue-trope in object 1 and the blue-trope in object 2 you become intuitively aware of a *universal*, a type, which can be predicated of both objects. As soon as we apprehend or intuit the universal 'blue' (no longer taken as an individual trope of a particular object, but as the *type*), we realize that it is possible that more than just one thing instantiates this type, i.e. that more than just one thing can be blue. If we *intuit* the universal in that way "the universal *itself is given to us*; we do not think of it merely in significative fashion as when we merely understand general names, but we apprehend it, *behold it*" (Husserl 2001: 292).

Intuiting the universal means intuiting the possible continuity of instantiations of the universal. This is not to say that intuiting the universal means intuiting all its possible instances. It means, however, that we intuit the possibility of an open infinity, i.e. an open continuity of instances of the universal. Apprehending a universal makes us realize that its instances outstrip what I have seen or imagined.

Now, why are these universals called "*empirical types*"? This is, admittedly, a somewhat misleading term, for they are apprehended by *a priori* means, via rational intuition. Husserl's reason to call them "empirical" is the following: Since the acquisition of the universal took its start in the experience of *actual objects*, the kind of universals we have acquired in this vein are *empirical types* or *empirical generalities*.<sup>23</sup> And this is where the major difference lies to what Husserl calls *pure essences* or *pure generalities* (Husserl 1973: 330). Empirical types are still *tied to the actual world*. What does that mean exactly?

In as much as empirical types are apprehended on the basis of contingently given particular objects in *actual* experience, these types are *grounded* in their actual instances. The unity of the empirically acquired type is, as Husserl (1973: 339) calls it, a '*contingent*' one.<sup>24</sup> That is to say that the

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<sup>21</sup> See also Sowa (2010, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> For a contemporary account of intuitive awareness of abstract objects see Tieszen (2005) and Chudnoff (2012, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Note that Husserl also acknowledges the possibility of apprehending empirical types on the basis of the experience of imagined objects. However, such imagination is not yet the method of free phantasy since it is imagining *actually* possible instances of universals. That is to say that the important Step 2 of EV has not consciously been carried out.

<sup>24</sup> It is important to see that the acquisition of empirical types that Husserl is elucidating has always already taken place in our everyday experience of the empirical world. That is to say that the factual world of experience is experienced as a typified world. Things are, as Husserl says, experienced as trees, bushes, animals, snakes, birds, etc. What is given in experience as a new individual calls to mind the similar and has a horizon of possible experience with corresponding prescriptions of familiarity and has, therefore, types of attributes not yet experienced but expected (Husserl 1973: 331). Since we already had previous experiences with dogs, when we see a new dog we immediately expect typical behavior

reason why Husserl takes those kinds of universals to exist contingently lies in the way they have been apprehended by a subject. This point is in need of explanation. Why should the epistemology of the universal affect its metaphysics? This has to do with Husserl's views on metaphysics in general. Husserl's phenomenology is characterized by a crucial assumption that has been called *ideal verificationism*. In Husserlian phenomenology, for an object *o* to exist just is for there to be a way for *o* to be possibly given to a (possible) subject. So, in Husserlian phenomenology the way some object *o* is apprehended (or *constituted*) by a (possible) subject is intimately tied to the way *o* exists.<sup>25</sup> This explains why the fact that the empirical type was apprehended on the basis of contingently given particular objects makes the empirical type “grounded in” (or, as Husserl would say, “founded on”) its actual instances and, hence, *contingent*. Their being grounded in their instances, i.e. in empirical particulars, makes it the case that empirical types are not “capable of prescribing rules to all empirical particulars” (Husserl 1973: 340).

This, however, is precisely the job-description of pure essences. Pure essences are supposed to have modal import or modal force. Their law-like structure, their normativity is supposed to prescribe rules to all empirical particulars. Now, to apprehend such pure essences *qua* essentialist laws that are capable of doing exactly that, the tie to the actual experience and to the contingently given extension of particulars must be severed. For Husserl, this is done by free imagination in EV. Only by explicitly treating the object we start with (Step 1) as a mere *arbitrary example* of the kind under consideration (Step 2) and by *voluntarily and arbitrarily varying* the guiding example in imagination (Step 3) we can come to be intuitively aware of *pure essences* that determine the essential structure of all objects of the kind in question (Step 4).<sup>26</sup>

On this picture, EV is a method of “*purification*”, as Kasmier (2010) calls it. Its aim is to *purify* the antecedently apprehended empirical type and to free it from its essential attachment to the actual course of the experience of contingently given particulars. In other words, the purpose of EV is to turn an empirical type into a pure essence. But what does this mean, exactly? Ideal verificationism will, again, be illuminating. If the way some universal is apprehended is decisive for the way the universal exists, the distinction between empirical type and pure universal can be interpreted as about the way the same universal is epistemically given. Take some universal, U. If we apprehend U solely on the basis of its contingently given instances, we have apprehended an empirical type. If we further contemplate U (or some *o-cum-U*) in an EV via free imagination, we come to apprehend a pure essence. But, so the critic might ask, empirical types and pure essences differ metaphysically. While empirical types are grounded in their instances, pure universals can prescribe rules to their empirical particulars. How can the same universal U have both (conflicting) properties? Again, the answer lies in Husserl's ideal verificationism. ‘Being grounded in *p*’ here is

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and features. The empirical type, i.e. the empirical concept ‘dog’, however, is subject to continuous corrections and changes. “Empirical concepts are changed by the continual admission of new attributes but according to an empirical idea of an open, ever-to-be-corrected concept which, at the same time, contains in itself the rule of empirical belief and is founded on the progress of actual experience.” (Husserl 1973: 333)

<sup>25</sup> Whether ideal verificationism commits Husserl to metaphysical idealism is subject of considerable debate. Due to space considerations, I cannot go into this any further. See Zahavi (2010, 2017) for a good overview of the debate and Hopp (2020) for a recent plea for the compatibility of ideal verificationism and metaphysical realism.

<sup>26</sup> A different way to put that point is the following: We can only intuit the *law-like* structure, the *normativity* or the *modal force* of pure essences by severing the ties to the actual course of the experience of contingently given particulars through EV. On this Husserlian picture, the *transition* between knowledge of essence and knowledge of modality is not inferential but intuitive. We apprehend the modal force of essences by intuiting essences through EV. Contrary to what one might think, this does not make Husserl a modalist about essence. Spinelli (2016, 2021) argues that Husserl's notion of essence is broadly Finean. Indeed, it is plausible that Husserl endorses something like *Non-Reductive Finean Essentialism* in Wallner & Vaidya's (2020) sense.

not a perfectly objectivistic metaphysical property but a way in which a thing is (possibly) constituted by some subject(s). The difference with regard to the presumably conflicting properties becomes epistemic. Apprehending U *qua* empirical type on the sole basis of its instances, we are not yet aware of U's law-like structure and its modal import. Only by severing the ties to actuality through free imagination in EV we become aware of that feature of U *qua* pure essence.

We are now ready to see how taking EV as a method of purification can provide an answer to the circularity charge (C).

*Answer to (C):* Step 3 requires us to tell variants of the kind or type in question from things that do not belong to the type. Husserl's point is that concrete similarity with the guiding example will do. However, the problem arises from the fact that similarity in *all* respects would not give us *variants* of the guiding example but rather *duplicates*. So, we have to know which the *relevant* respects are, according to which concrete similarity is needed. This, however, is not circular, since it does not require us to know the *essence* that we seek to determine. All we have to be acquainted with is the *empirical type* that we seek to *purify* in a specific EV. Being acquainted with the type, say 'material object', already means knowing in which respect the variants have to be concretely similar, they all have to be material objects.

In sum, Kasmier's answer to (C) is that EV does not presuppose knowledge of (or acquaintance with) *essence* but rather knowledge of (or acquaintance with) *empirical types*. Thus, EV is *not* viciously circular. It is, however, in a crucial sense incomplete, as will become clear in a bit.

In explaining the difference between empirical types and pure essences, I have often alluded to Husserl's ideal verificationism. Does this mean that in order to accept Kasmier's purification interpretation of EV, we have to buy into Husserl's general picture of ideal verificationism? No. The important point that gets us out of the circularity charge is that there is a direct (non-circular) way or apprehending enough of a kind or universal U (through intuition of U *qua* empirical type) such that we can feed it into an EV, in order to get information about what the *relevant* respects of similarity are. This can be secured, even if we drop the talk of two different universals that makes sense only against the background of ideal verificationism.<sup>27</sup>

### ***EV and Structural Completeness***

Having dealt with the circularity objection, we can finally come back to the question as to whether EV offers a structurally complete account of the epistemology of essence. The answer we gave to (C) entails that EV presupposes knowledge of empirical types. In this sense, EV cannot offer a structurally complete picture of the epistemology of essence. I argue that this is due to the fact that imagination as it is used here, is not a directly justifying mental capacity.

The circularity objection shows that the beliefs about essence we arrive at via EV epistemically depend on beliefs about empirical types. The problem which lead to the circularity charge is that we need to *restrict* our imagination in EV. Step 3 requires the imaginative production of only variants that are *relevantly* similar to the guiding example. Negatively put, Step 3 requires us

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<sup>27</sup> See Wallner (2021) for a discussion of how Husserl's ideal verificationism affects his thoughts on essence and modality.

to recognize when an imagined object is no longer a variant of the kind in question. It is for this reason that any belief about essence yielded by an EV epistemically depends for its justification on background assumptions that appropriately restrict the respective EV. These background assumptions concern, as we have seen, the empirical types that we seek to *purify* in an EV. Hence, essentialist beliefs yielded by EV epistemically depend on beliefs about the respective empirical types. EV and imagination as it is employed in EV are, therefore, not directly justifying mental capacities.

Referring to the *road map*, i.e. the general and structural criteria of a potentially complete account in the epistemology of essence given in Section “The Road Map”, we can say the following: Husserl’s (MC)-type account succeeds in giving a quite detailed answer to (MC.i), i.e. his account of EV. However, since the latter crucially appeals to a mental capacity that is not directly justifying but is epistemically dependent on background assumptions concerning empirical types, the account is not complete without also accounting for these background assumptions.

The point that imagination is a non-directly justifying mental capacity is not exactly new. In recent literature, several authors have argued for similar claims. Gregory (2010), Kung (2010) and Berto & Schoonen (2018) all argue, roughly, that *in many cases* of imagination (i.e. cases in which imagination does not work purely sensory) the justificatory power of imagination, say in the epistemology of modality, crucially depends on background assumptions about the objects or scenarios imagined, on the basis of which these imaginings operate.<sup>28</sup> Vaidya & Wallner (2021) discuss this issue in terms of the *input*-question: to what degree do mental capacities like conceiving and imagination depend for their justificatory power on their *inputs*? They argue that these inputs, i.e. the background assumptions, on the basis of which conceiving and imagination operate, are that which creates *epistemic friction* for these mental capacities. In cases where conceivability or imagination are applied in the epistemology of *modality*, Vaidya & Wallner (2021) argue that these *epistemic friction creators*, i.e. the background assumptions, are *essentialist* propositions (or beliefs). On the Husserlian picture, where imagination is applied in the epistemology of *essence*, the *epistemic friction creators* are propositions (or beliefs) about the *empirical type* in question.

The claim here is *not* that imagination is of no epistemic use. Also, I do *not* claim that absolutely no application of imagination is directly justifying. What is important, however, is that Husserl’s application of imagination depends for its justificatory power on background assumptions concerning empirical types. This makes Husserl’s EV, structurally incomplete in the sense advanced in Section “The Road Map”, for it can be taken to *ground* knowledge of essence in knowledge of empirical types.

Note, however, that there might be a way to complete the story with Husserlian means. Husserl indeed offers an account of how we come to know empirical types. In as much as Husserl appeals to our *intuitive awareness* of universals, he has an (MC)-type answer to that question. I already gave the rough outline of how intuition of universals works, according to Husserl.<sup>29</sup> So, there is a Husserlian answer to the (MC.i)-type follow up question of how we know empirical types. What is more, it appeals to intuition or intuitive awareness, a mental capacity that fits the bill of being directly justifying. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, I cannot argue for the claim that

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<sup>28</sup> See Lam (2018) for a defense of the view that non-sensory imaginings can (directly) yield *prima facie* justification. Williamson (2007) also holds that the imaginative evaluation of counterfactual suppositions has to crucially hold fixed some background assumptions. However, Williamson seems to disagree with a certain version of the claim that those background assumptions are themselves in need of justification. See Vaidya & Wallner (2021: §6) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>29</sup> For more detailed discussion, see Husserl (1973, 2001). For contemporary accounts of intuitive awareness of abstract objects, see Tieszen (2005) and Chudnoff (2012, 2013).

intuition is directly justifying. I take it, however, that, at least among those who are sympathetic to the use of intuitions in philosophy, this is the received view.<sup>30</sup>

So, *on the assumption* that intuition is directly justifying, I conclude that Husserl's EV *plus* his (or a suitable similar) account of *intuitive* awareness of universals like empirical types meet the general and structural criteria for a complete account in the epistemology of essence presented in Section "The Road Map". If we take EV to be the whole story of the epistemology of essence, it is structurally incomplete. Yet, Husserl's story might be completed, such that, at least structurally, it is capable of taking us all the way down the explanatory and justificatory road. The details of this completion, however, have to be left for a different occasion.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

I have argued that Lowe's and Hale's account of the epistemology of essence both, in one sense or the other, fall short of offering a complete picture of the epistemology of modality. After I have laid out what I take to be general conditions for a structurally complete account in the epistemology of essences, Husserl's approach was presented. Using the work of Kasmier (2010) I have defended Husserl's EV against a circularity objection. This defense showed that EV alone falls short of a complete picture of the epistemology of essence for it crucially appeals to a mental capacity that is not directly justifying. However, I have indicated that if we supplement EV with a broadly Husserlian epistemology of universals, appealing to intuition, the story of the epistemology of essence might be completed. In as much as this story finally appeals to intuition, a directly justifying capacity, it gets us as far down the explanatory (or justificatory road) as it can get:

*Immediate 'seeing,' not merely sensuous, experiential seeing, but seeing in the universal sense as an originally presentive consciousness of any kind whatever, is the ultimate legitimizing source of all rational assertions. This source has its legitimizing function only because, and to the extent that, it is an originally presentive source. If we see an object with full clarity, if we have effected an explication and a conceptual apprehension purely on the basis of the seeing and within the limits of what is actually seized upon in seeing, if we then see (this being a new mode of 'seeing') how the object is, the faithful expressive statement has, as a consequence, its legitimacy (Husserl 1983: 36-37).*

There are *three caveats* that need to be mentioned. *First*, it seems that, at least in the structural and general sense I appeal to in Section "The Road Map", the Husserlian account presented here has the edge over the Lowe's and Hale's approach. Note, however, that I left it open whether Lowe's

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Bealer (2002), Berghofer (2018, 2020), BonJour (1998), Chudnoff (2012, 2013), and Huemer (2007).

<sup>31</sup> If the end of the explanatory (or justificatory) road is marked by the appeal to a directly justifying mental capacity like intuition, one might wonder why EV is not the end of the explanatory road, for it crucially appeals to intuition in Step 4. Chudnoff's (2012, 2013) notion of *intuition experience* might be useful here. Since Steps 1-3 are constitutively important for the intuition of essence in Step 4, the whole EV (Steps 1-4) forms an *intuition experience* in Chudnoff's sense. Given that EV crucially appeals to *imagination*, a mental capacity that, at least in this application, needs to be restricted by background assumptions that are themselves in need of justification, the whole intuition experience that is EV cannot be the end of the explanatory (or justificatory) road. However, if we take on board Husserl's (directly justifying) method of universal intuition we can account for the justification of these background assumptions (about empirical types) in a way that makes the whole story (EV + universal intuition) a structurally complete picture of the epistemology of essence. On the other hand, one might wonder why the intuition of empirical types doesn't suffice, especially since the distinction between empirical type and essence might just be about the way we epistemically regard the same universal. The answer is because intuition of the empirical type does not give us evidence or justification concerning the full modal import of the essence in question.

or Hale's account could be further developed so as to meet the criteria of a structurally complete epistemology of essence laid out in Section "The Road Map". Even though I have raised some worries especially with regard to Hale's account, I did not argue that either Lowe's or Hale's approach are in principle incapable of being adequately refined and expanded.

*Second*, as already mentioned, the notion of completeness I had in mind here is justificatory (and foundationalist) in nature. This means that an account is complete in this sense, if it succeeds in tracing the justificatory chain of our essentialist beliefs back to the very end of this chain. An account in the epistemology of essence can be complete in this sense without, say, accounting for all the essentialist beliefs in all areas or domains. Completeness with regard to areas or domains is another, different sense of completeness that I have not discussed. That is to say that the Husserlian account might be incomplete with regard to this latter meaning of the term. Suppose that some essentialist knowledge is only to be achieved through natural sciences, not via some method involving intuition and imagination. (Think, e.g. of the essentialist proposition that it is essential to water to contain hydrogen.) It is compatible with my arguments that the Husserlian picture is incomplete in this sense. I did not mean to argue that the Husserlian approach can account for all the essentialist beliefs in all areas and domains but merely that it drives those it can account for all the way down the explanatory and justificatory road.

*Third*, the notion of completeness I had in mind here is completely general and structural. Such considerations are largely independent from *material* considerations. So, one might agree that Husserl's account is in the general and structural sense complete, while simultaneously disagreeing with one (or more) of the particular, material answers that the Husserlian picture provides.

I am sure that there is quite some potential to disagree with Husserl's material answers. Particularly, one might have qualms with the way Husserl tries to get rid of the ties to the actual world in EV and to purify empirical types to pure essences by using imagination. However, sorting out these material issues is a task for another paper. The conclusion of this paper is that if we accept EV as a method of purification, and Husserl's universal intuition, we can escape EV's circularity charge and the ensuing epistemology of essence is *structurally complete*.

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