1 Introduction

2 types of answers to the question of what is the source of our knowledge of modal propositions:

(a) Appeal to a **mental capacity** (conceivability, imagination, perception, intuition, …)

*Further Question:* How exactly does applying this mental capacity work?

(b) Appeal to **another kind of knowledge** in which modal knowledge is **grounded**

*Further Questions:* (i) How does the mediation work? (ii) How do we acquire this other kind of knowledge?

**Finean Essentialism**

*Metaphysical Thesis* (Fine): Metaphysical modality is **grounded** in essences.

*Epistemological Thesis* (Lowe, Hale): Knowledge of metaphysical modality is grounded in **knowledge of essence**.

(b)-type answer

**Target Question:** How do we have knowledge of essences—‘K(E)’?

**Target Theses:** (At least structurally) Husserl’s answer has the edge over Lowe’s and Hale’s. The circularity charges against Husserl’s account can be overcome.

2 Lowe’s Epistemology of Essence

Lowe’s Answer (LA): We know the essence of $x$ simply by understanding what $x$ is.

→ plausible argument that we have K(E)

→ **unsatisfactory** as an answer to how we have K(E)

→ For Lowe, the essence of $x = \text{what } x \text{ is.}$

→ Hence, (LA) collapses to: ‘We know the essence of $x$ by understanding the essence of $x$’.

→ Lowe does neither give an (a)-type nor a (b)-type answer.

→ He does not allude to a mental capacity!

→ ‘understanding what $x$ is’ is an **epistemic stock term**

→ (LA) collapses to: ‘We have epistemic stock of the essence of $x$ for we have epistemic stock of the essence of $x$’.

→ circular answer!

3 Hale’s Epistemology of Essence

Hale’s Answer (HA): *A priori* knowledge of essence is grounded in **knowledge of meaning**.

→ (HA) is a **(b)**-type answer

*Further Questions:* (i) How does the mediation between K(M) and K(E) work? (ii) How do we acquire K(M) in the first place? (not tackled by Hale)
Hale’s answer to (i): K(M) suffices for K(E).

**Easy case (explicit definition)**
- We know the essence—i.e. the real definition—of a square by knowing the nominal definition of the word ‘square’.
- 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.

**Not so easy cases (undefinable basic logical words)**
- 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).

Hale does not answer (ii), yet one could appeal to the mental capacity of understanding meaning.

→ ‘understanding meaning’ here is not an epistemic stock term

→ (HA) is not circular; it gets us further down the explanatory road.

→ Worry concerning (HA): It might get the order of grounding wrong…

4 Husserl’s Epistemology of Essence

Husserl’s Answer (HuA): We are able to ‘see’ or intuit the essence of a thing x of a kind k by varying x in imagination.

**Eidetic Variation (EV)**

(St1) Start with an example of a particular object of a specific kind.
(St2) Turn it into an arbitrary example of that kind (i.e. into a guiding model).
(St3) Start voluntarily and arbitrarily varying the guiding example in imagination by varying an arbitrary feature of the original.
(St4) A unity (an invariant structure) becomes evident in the multiplicity of variants. → intuiting (‘seeing’) the essence of the object qua example of the kind.

→ (HuA) is not circular like (LA)
→ (HuA) is an (a)-type answer
→ (HuA) appeals to mental capacities (imagination, intuition)
→ (HuA) answers the further question of how these mental capacities are applied to get K(E)

→ Phenomenologically speaking (HuA) is as far down the explanatory road as it gets:

[P]henomenological philosophy […] focuses on the founding structure of higher-level accomplishments (e.g. intellectual accomplishments like judgments) in certain types of lower-level experiential givenness. (Rinofner-Kreidl 2016, 215f)

“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.” (Husserl 1983, 36f)
5 The Circularity Objections Against EV

(C1) If we were not acquainted with the essential features of the kind in question, we could not choose an example of that very kind. (St1)

(C2) If we were not acquainted with the essential features of the kind in question, we obviously could not recognize which of the arbitrarily produced variants still belong and which do not belong to the kind in question. (St3)

⇒ In order to yield essentialist knowledge, EV has to presuppose essentialist knowledge. Circle!

Defense Strategy 1: Bite the Bullet and argue that EV does not discover essences but only clarifies them. EV makes implicit K(E) explicit. (Mohanty 1991)

Defense Strategy 2: EV is not circular. What is presupposed is knowledge of empirical types not knowledge of essences. (2 different kinds of universals) (Kasmier 2010)

⇒ We achieve knowledge of empirical types—K(ET)—by universal intuition (UI)
⇒ EV purifies K(ET) to knowledge of pure essences—K(PE)

Answer to (C1): (St1) is not circular, for in order to pick an example of the type that is to be purified, we don’t need K(PE) but only K(ET).

Answer to (C2): (St3) is not circular. (St3) requires us to tell variants of the kind from things that do not belong to the type. We don’t need K(PE) to do that; K(ET) suffices.

6 Another Circularity Charge (C3) in the Vicinity?

⇒ Is K(ET) modal knowledge?
⇒ If it is, then Husserl’s account might be circular in virtue of presupposing modal knowledge.

(1) K(E) grounds K(Modality) (Husserl’s essentialist epistemology of modality)
(2) We get K(E) by EV. (Husserl’s epistemology of essence)
(3) EV presupposes K(ET) (We need to know empirical types to conduct EV.)
(4) K(ET) = K(Modality) (crucial premise: K(ET) is modal knowledge)
(5) To get K(Modality) we have to presuppose K(Modality).
(6) EV can’t be the fundamental access point to K(Modality) on pain of circularity.

Access Question (AQ): How are we to epistemically access the modal space from outside the modal space?

Navigation Question (NQ): How are we to epistemically navigate within the modal space?

Defense Strategy against (C3)
• (C3) arises only if Husserl’s account involving EV is taken as an answer to (AQ)
• Bite the Bullet! Accept that Husserl’s account is circular if taken as answer to (AQ).
• Regard Husserl’s essence-based account as answer to (NQ)!
- We take $K(ET)$ (knowledge of worldly modality), plug it into EV and purify it to $K(PE)$ (knowledge of absolute modality).

$\Rightarrow$ We find the answer to (AQ) in Husserl’s Universal Intuition (UI):
$\Rightarrow$ UI gives us $K(ET)$ and, hence, access to the modal realm.
$\Rightarrow$ EV purifies this worldly modality to pure essences and absolute modality. (Answer to (NQ).)

Beware: This changes the architecture of modal knowledge:
  
  Traditional essentialism: transition from modality-free $K(E)$ to $K$(metaphysical modality).
  
  Husserl’s essentialism: $K(E)$ is not modality-free; answer to (AQ) lies in UI of ET.

Literature


Mallozzi, A. (manuscript): “Putting Modal Metaphysics First. From Knowledge of Essence to Knowledge of Metaphysical Necessity”


Abbreviations

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<th>E</th>
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