Understanding, Imagination, and the Epistemology of Essence

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Austrian Science Fund (FWF): P 29050
The Epistemology of Modality

What is the source of our knowledge of modal propositions?

2 ways to answer:

(a) Appeal to mental capacity (conceivability, imagination, perception, intuition)
   Further Question: How does applying this mental capacity get us to modal knowledge?

(b) Appeal to another kind of knowledge in which modal knowledge is grounded (counterfactual knowledge, essentialist knowledge)
   Further Questions: (i) How does the mediation work?
       (ii) How do we acquire 2nd kind of knowledge?
Finean Essentialism: Metaphysical Thesis (Fine 1994)

- Metaphysical modality is *grounded* in the essence of things.
  (Essence of $x = \text{what } x \text{ is})$


- Knowledge of metaphysical modality is *grounded* in (or: guided by) knowledge of the essence of things.

  - Further Questions: (i) How exactly does the mediation between essentialist and modal knowledge work? (ii) How do we know essences in the first place?
Target Question

- How do we know essences?
- How do we acquire knowledge of the essence or nature of things?

Target Theses

- (At least structurally) Husserl’s answer has the edge over both Lowe’s and Hale’s.
- The seemingly devastating circularity charges against Husserl’s account can be overcome.
Overview

1. Introduction
2. Lowe’s Epistemology of Essence
3. Hale’s Epistemology of Essence
4. Husserl’s Epistemology of Essence
5. The Circularity Objection(s) Against EV
6. Another Circularity Charge in the Vicinity?
**Question:** How do we know essences?

- The essence of \( x = \text{what} \ x \ \text{is} \).
- Hence, the essence of \( x \) is given by \( x \)'s **real definition**.
- Lowe’s answer (LA): We know the essence of \( x \) by **understanding what \( x \) is**.

Lowe’s (2012, 944) argument **that** we have knowledge of essence:

“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.”  (Lowe 2012, 944)
Question: How do we know essences?

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

- This answer is unsatisfactory!

- Remember: essence of $x = $ what $x$ is
  so, knowing/understanding the essence of $x = $ knowing/understanding what $x$ is

- (LA) collapses to: We know the essence of $x$ by understanding the essence of $x$. 
Question: How do we know essences?

- Lowe’s answer (LA): We know the essence of x by understanding what x is.

- Part of the reason why (LA) is unsatisfactory, is that Lowe does not appeal to any specific mental capacities.

- Isn’t understanding what x is a mental capacity?

- No! In this context ‘understanding’ is an epistemic stock term.
**Question:** How do we know essences?

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• No! In this context ‘understanding’ is an epistemic stock term.

How do we acquire understanding of what x is?
**Question:** How do we know essences?

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

- (LA) collapses to: We have epistemic stock (knowledge) of the essence of $x$ for we have epistemic stock (understanding) of the essence of $x$.

- Circular! (LA) doesn’t take us further down the explanatory road:
  - (LA) does not appeal to a mental capacity as means of our knowledge of essences (for ‘understanding’ here is an epistemic stock term).
  - (LA) does not ground knowledge/understanding of essences in another kind of knowledge/understanding (for knowledge/understanding of the essence of $x$ = for knowledge/understanding of what $x$ is).
Explanatory Road Map: Lowe’s circular answer

How do we get epistemic stock of essence?

By having epistemic stock of essence!
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3. **Hale’s Epistemology of Essence**

4. **Husserl’s Epistemology of Essence**

5. **The Circularity Objection(s) Against EV**

6. **Another Circularity Charge in the Vicinity?**

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General Question: How do we know essences?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Priori Knowledge of Essence</th>
<th>A Posteriori Knowledge of Essence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;It is essential to a triangle that its interior angles add up to 180 degrees.&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;It is essential to water to contain hydrogen.&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Hale’s acknowledges both, a priori and a posteriori knowledge of essences.
- I am going to concentrate on a priori knowledge of essences.
**Question:** How do we know essences?

- Hale’s answer (HA): A priori knowledge of essences—K(E)—is grounded in knowledge of meaning—K(M).

- This (b)-type answer raises 2 further questions about
  1. the mediation of knowledge of meaning & knowledge of essence;
  2. how we acquire knowledge of meaning in the first place.

- Ad (i): Hale: K(M) suffices for K(E).
  - Easy cases: If we know the explicit nominal definition of ‘square’, we know the real definition (essence) of square.
  - Not so easy cases: Even though we cannot define basic logical words like ‘and’, “knowing what [the word] ‘and’ means is sufficient for knowledge of truth-functional conjunction” (Hale 2013, 258).
Question: How do we know essences?

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  (i) the mediation of knowledge of meaning & knowledge of essence;
  (ii) how we acquire knowledge of meaning in the first place.

- Ad (ii): Hale does not answer (ii), but one could appeal to the mental capacity of understanding meaning

  - How is understanding meaning (Hale) a mental capacity and ‘understanding what x is’ (Lowe) an epistemic stock term?

A: There is a certain danger of getting attacked by a dog.
B: How do you know?
A: By my capacity of understanding the words on the sign.
Explanatory Road Map: Hale’s (b)-type answer

How do we get $K(E)$?

By our $K(M)$!

(i) Transition: $K(M)$ to $K(E)$?

K($M$) suffices for K($E$)!

(ii) How do we get $K(M)$?

By our capacity of understanding meaning!

How exactly does this mental capacity work in the acquisition of $K(M)$?
Question: How do we know essences?

- Hale’s answer (HA): A priori knowledge of essences—K(E)—is grounded in knowledge of meaning—K(M).

- ... is not circular like (LA).

- ... brings us down the explanatory road.

- ... trades on the plausible connection: K(E) and K(M)

- ... grounds K(E) in K(M)

⇒ Worry for Hale: Is the order of grounding the other way around?

  - The plausible connection between K(E) and K(M) would be preserved even no the converse grounding claim that grounds K(M) in K(E).
Worry for Hale: The order of grounding is the other way around!

- Metaphysical grounding does not entail epistemic grounding, but you might think that the following symmetry intuitions are plausible:

(SI) Plausibly, essence \textit{metaphysically} grounds modality iff knowledge of essence \textit{epistemically} grounds knowledge of modality.

(SI*) Plausibly, meaning \textit{metaphysically} grounds essence iff knowledge of meaning \textit{epistemically} grounds knowledge of essence.
Worry for Hale: The order of grounding is the other way around!

1. Knowledge of essence is grounded in knowledge of meaning.
2. Thus, by (SI*), essence is grounded in meaning.
3. Metaphysical modality is grounded in essence. (Finean Essentialism)
4. So, by transitivity of grounding, metaphysical modality is grounded in meaning.
5. Plausibly, meaning is grounded in linguistic convention.
6. Linguistic convention is contingent.
7. So, by transitivity of grounding, metaphysical modality is grounded in something contingent.
8. Metaphysical modality is absolute and, thus, cannot be grounded in something contingent. (Hale’s metaphysical position)
9. Contradiction between (7) and (8).
Worry for Hale: The order of grounding is the other way around!

- If Hale wants to hang on to his Epistemology of Essence (i.e. $K(E)$ is grounded in $K(M)$), he has to give up one of (A)-(D)

  (A) Finean Essentialism: Metaphysical modality is grounded in essence.
  (B) $(SI^*)$: Meaning metaphysically grounds essence iff knowledge of meaning epistemically grounds knowledge of essence.
  (C) Grounding is transitive.
  (D) Metaphysical modality is absolute (and, thus, can’t be grounded in something contingent.

- It’s easiest for Hale to give up $(SI^*)$.
- Indeed all Hale needs to give up is $(SI^*)$’s right-to-left-direction.
- If we want to hang on to (A)-(D), we have to give up Hale’s EoE!
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**Question:** How do we know essences?

- Husserl’s answer (HuA): by *Eidetic Variation (EV)*

- We are able to ‘see’ or *intuit essences* ...

- ... by *varying* an object of a specific kind in *imagination*.

→ One can distinguish 4 steps in EV.
Eidetic Variation (EV)

(St1) Start w/ 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.

(See Vaidya (2010) for a somewhat different Husserl inspired account of EV, which is called ‘VIM’.)
Eidetic Variation (EV)

(St1) Start with an example of a particular *object of a specific kind* that you have experienced or imagined.

- **Start**: *object of a specific kind*
- **Result**: essence of the object *qua instance of a kind*.

**Example:**

*Start*: this bottle as an instance of the kind ‘bottle’

*Result*: *eidos* ‘bottle’ (what is ess. for this bottle *qua bottle*)

*Start*: this bottle as an instance of the kind ‘material object’,

*Result*: *eidos* ‘material object’ (ess. of this bottle *qua mat. obj.*)
Eidetic Variation (EV)

(St2) Turn it into an *arbitrary example of that kind* (i.e. into a guiding model).

- This modifies the way this object is regarded.

- **Example**: regard this specific bottle as merely one possible instance of a kind (say, ‘material object’) among other instances of that kind—i.e. as a *guiding example* of that kind.

- **Purpose of (St2)**: to treat actualities as mere possibilities among other possibilities.
Eidetic Variation (EV)

(St3) Start voluntarily and arbitrarily varying the guiding example in imagination by varying an arbitrary feature of the original.

- The imaginative variation must be free (arbitrary), except for one restriction:

- All variants must be ‘concretely similar’ to the guiding example with respect to the relevant properties pertaining to the type under considerations.

- arbitrariness → makes it reasonable to stop EV
Eidetic Variation (EV)

(St4) Intuit (‘see’) the *unity* (the *invariant structure*) that becomes *evident* in the multiplicity of variants!

- This essence presents itself as an *essentialist law* about the kind.
- We can then *see* that it applies to every instance of this kind.
- The essence bears in itself “*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)
- **Essentialist** knowledge and *modal* knowledge are *entangled*: By apprehending the essentialist law we apprehend what is necessary for every object of the kind in question.
Eidetic Variation (EV)

(St1) picking an example

(St2) turning it into an arbitrary example of the kind in question

(St3) varying the example in imagination

(St4) intuiting/‘seeing’ the essence (the invariant structure) and thereby apprehending modal knowledge.
Husserl’s EoE compared to Lowe’s and Hale’s

- Husserl’s EoE is not circular like Lowe’s.
- Husserl gives an (a)-type answer to how we know essences.
- He does not ground K(E) in another kind of knowledge.
- He directly appeals to mental capacities (imagination, intuition)
- What is more, he even gives a detailed account of how these mental capacities work in the acquisition of K(E).
Explanatory Road Map: Husserl’s (a)-type answer

How do we get K(E)?

By using our imagination (EV) to intuit essences (EI)!

How exactly does applying these mental capacities work in the acquisition of K(E)?

Detailed account of UI, EV and EI

- Husserl describes also how imaginative variation has to go about to prepare the possibility for intuiting the essential structure.

→ Paradigm phenomenological answer to how we know essence.
Paradigm phenomenological answer to how we know essence

- “[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)

- Husserl’s EoE traces back our ability to make competent judgments about essences to the low-level experiential givenness, i.e. the intuition or the immediate ‘seeing’ of (pure) essences which is being made possible by eidetic variation in imagination.

- “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)
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The Circularity Objection(s) against EV

- EV presupposes the kind of knowledge that it is purported to elucidate or to provide access to.

(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.
Defense Strategy 1

- **Biting the Bullet:** Admit the circular structure! *(Mohanty 1991)*

- Circular structure is not bad, because EV is **not a method of discovery**! (EV was never supposed to *discover* essences!)

- EV is a method of **clarification:** making **explicit** an already implicitly known essence.

→ How do we acquire implicit knowledge of essences?
Defense Strategy 2

- No circle! EV does not presuppose essentialist knowledge but knowledge of empirical types. (Kasmier 2010)
- Distinction betw. 2 universals: empirical types vs. pure essences
- EV is a purification of an antecedently apprehended empirical type into a pure essence.

→ How do we acquire knowledge of empirical types—K(ET)?

(See Vaidya (2010) for a different strategy to answer a similar objection.)
Universal Intuition of Empirical Types

- 2 blue objects affect you as a unity.
- Your focus shifts from the 2 particulars to what makes them similar.
- A universal—a type—emerges.
- As soon as we apprehend the universal ‘blue’, we realize that it is possible that more than just one thing instantiates this type, i.e. that more then just one thing can be blue.
Universal Intuition of Empirical Types

- Apprehending a universal is apprehending the possible continuity of possible like experiences.

- 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.

- Thus, empirical types are tied to the actual world.
Empirical vs. Pure Generalities

**Empirical Types (ET)**
- open extension of possible instantiations
- ‘worldly’ (restricted) poss.
- tied to the actual world
- founded on the (contingent) progress of actual experience (restricted)

**Pure Essences (PE)**
- open extension of possible instantiations
- ‘pure’ (absolute) possibility
- not tied to the actual world
- independent of such contingencies — free imagination (not restricted)
- prescribe rules to all empirical particulars
The Circularity Objection(s) Refuted

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. I.e. we need to know what the relevant aspects are with regard to which similarity to the guiding example is needed. We don’t need K(PE) to do that K(ET) suffices.
The Circularity Objection(s) Refuted

- So, EV does not presuppose essentialist knowledge but rather knowledge of empirical types.
- The latter is brought about by universal intuition (UI).

Knowledge of Pure Essences

Knowledge of Empirical Types

EV

UI
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A Different Circularity Objection (C3)?

Knowledge of Pure Essences $\rightarrow$ Modal Knowledge

Knowledge of Empirical Types (= Modal Knowledge)

$\rightarrow$ EV might not be circular in virtue of presupposing essentialist knowledge but in virtue of presupposing modal knowledge.
Question: Is knowledge of empirical types modal knowledge?

• It seems it is:

• Apprehending an empirical generality is apprehending the possible continuity of possible like experiences.

• If I am acquainted with the empirical type ‘blue’,...
  • I know that more than the just perceived objects can be blue;
  • I also know how an object must be to be classified as blue.

⇒ knowledge of a ‘worldly’ kind of modality (tied to @)
A Different Circularity Objection (C3)?

(1) Husserl’s EoM: K(E) grounds K(Modality)

(2) Husserl’s EoE: We get K(E) by EV

(3) EV presupposes K(ET)

(4) K(ET) = K(Modality)

(5) To get K(Modality) we have to presuppose K(Modality)

(6) EV cannot be the fundamental access point to K(Modality) on pain of circularity.
A Different Circularity Objection (C3)?

Knowledge of Pure Essences \(\Rightarrow\) Modal Knowledge

Knowledge of Empirical Types (= Modal Knowledge)

\[\rightarrow\] EV might not be circular in virtue of presupposing essentialist knowledge but in virtue of presupposing modal knowledge.
2 Questions in the Epistemology of Modality

- *access question (AQ) vs. navigation question (NQ)*

  (AQ) How are we to epistemically *access* the modal space from outside the modal space?

  (NQ) How are we to epistemically *navigate* within the modal space?
2 Questions in the Epistemology of Modality

(AQ) How are we to epistemically access the modal space from outside the modal space?
2 Questions in the Epistemology of Modality

(NQ) How are we to epistemically navigate within the modal space?
Defense Strategy Against (C3)

→ (C3) arises only if Husserl’s essence-based account involving EV is taken as an answer to (AQ):

- **Bite the Bullet!** Accept that Husserl’s essence-based 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).

→ But how should we answer (AQ)?
Question: How should we answer (AQ)?

- **Universal Intuition (UI)** gives us K(ET) and, hence, access to the modal realm. (Answer to (AQ).)

- **Eidetic Variation (EV)** purifies this worldly modality to pure essences and absolute modality. (Answer to (NQ).)

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

Knowledge of Pure Essences $\rightarrow$ Knowledge of Pure Modality

Knowledge of Empirical Types (= Knowledge of Worldly Modality)

Answer to (NQ)

Answer to (AQ)
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Bonus: Questions & Objections

- How is it possible to get rid of the ties to the actual world and to purify worldly into pure, absolute, metaphysical, objective modality by using imagination?

- Doesn’t imagination always take place in the actual world?

- So how can it get rid of the ties to the actual world?

- Isn’t imagination always confined to a recombination of things in the actual world?

- So how can it get rid of the ties to the actual world?

- Isn’t imagination always a mental process conducted by an individual subject?

- So how can it get to objective, absolute, pure, metaphysical modality?
Bonus: Phenomenological Answer to Questions & Objections

- **Any cognitive capacity** we can use to acquire justified beliefs about pure, absolute, objective, metaphysical modality is
  
  (a) conducted in the actual world,
  
  (b) subject to similar constraints stemming from the actual world and
  
  (c) conducted by an individual subject.

- **Phenomenological claim**: applying our imagination in the careful and methodical way proposed is the best shot at purification that we have.

- **Concede** that epistemic subjects are tied to a perspective & to the actual world and to limitations that come with that.

- **Phenomenology**: *relational* instead of an *objectivist* account of objectivity, purity and absoluteness.
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Literature
Mallozzi, A. (manuscript): “Putting Modal Metaphysics First. From Knowledge of Essence to Knowledge of Metaphysical Necessity”

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