

# Ideal Verificationism and Realism



Gregor Bös

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First Austrian Summer School in Phenomenology  
University of Graz, Austria

# Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Realism
- 3 Ideal Verificationism
- 4 Ideal Possibilities
- 5 Conclusion

# Disagreements about Transcendental Idealism

- Assumption from the start: phenomenology is not metaphysically inert.
- There are many proposed definitions of transcendental idealism. I will not offer another.
- I am rather interested in how much classic phenomenology is compatible with realism.

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# What is Realism: a comparative notion

- easier to understand as a comparative notion: more realist vs. less realist, e.g. when discussing different notions of colours, aesthetics, truth.
  - The anti-realist emphasizes a dependence on us (“you cannot see red without eyes”)
  - The realist emphasizes the independence of us (“tomatoes would still be red if nobody could see them”)

# What is realism: some preliminary considerations

- Harder to define as an absolute notion. The obvious starting point would be:
  - Ontological thesis (1): the world exists.
  - Ontological thesis (2): the world exists mind-independently.
- But this leaves something to be desired:
  - Somebody could say: I agree! There is a real world, independent of us – it is beyond this life, and we will never know what it is like.
- There seem to be two additions necessary, to make the realist a realist:
  - Epistemologically: We sometimes know about the world.
  - Semantically: some of the truths we can know are independent of us.

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# Realism and realist truth

- Realist truth: whether a proposition is true is independent of the means to know/decide/prove that proposition.
- I think this semantic component of realism deserves more attention.

## Why require realism about truth?

- Two people could agree about an existence claim: “the world exists”. But on different notions of truth, this will mean different things.
- if all truths depend on us, could we really think that we are in touch with the world? We might end up with the skeptical version, where there is a mind-independent world, but we never really know about it because we only know the mind-dependent phenomena.
- I take Husserl to reject such a version of unknowable things-in-themselves

# Realism in Early Phenomenology

- The *Logical Investigations* defend a (comparatively) realist understanding of truth:
  - An explanation of truth in terms of rational capacities would be like the attempt to explain “the art of dance [Tanzkunst]” by the “capacity [Vermögen] to dance artistically” (Prolegomena, §58)
- All this happens before talk about epoché and reduction.
- But already in the *Investigations*, we find a form of correlationism:
 

*Evidently, there is [besteht] a general equivalence between the sentences “A is true” and “it is possible, that someone judges with evidence that A” (Prolegomena, §50)*

  - Truth is later defined as the “full concordance” between intended (Gemeintem) and given (Gegebenem) as such. (LU6, §39)
  - But what “might be psychologically impossible” could still be “ideally possible” (Prolegomena, §50)

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# Ideal Verificationism

Hopp 2018 on “ideal verificationism”:

- 1 For every  $x$  that exists, there is a set of propositions about  $x$  that are true.
  - 2 For every true proposition  $p$  there is a fulfilling sense  $p_f$ .
  - 3 For every fulfilling sense  $p_f$  there is an (ideal) possibility of experience in which the content  $p_f$  is given intuitively
- This can be formulated without reference to transcendental idealism. Is it compatible with realism?
  - Hopp seems to think so:
 

*“no form of ideal verificationism [...] entails or even motivates idealism or anti-realism.” (Hopp 2020, 129)*
  - Also Hardy argues that the following notion of truth is compatible with a realist understanding of phenomenology:
 

*“ $p$  is true if and only if it is ideally possible that  $p$  is evident” (Hardy 2013, 100)*



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# The Realism Debate in Phenomenology

- Contemporary interpreters argue whether Husserl's correlationism requires only the *ideal* possibility of evidence, or a narrower *motivated* possibility (Zahavi 2017)
- But even for the *comparatively* realist position, these might be in tension with realism in the absolute sense.
- In most metaphysical debates, even in-principle-knowability for all truths is understood as core anti-realist commitment

# Realism without realism about truth?

- in the theory of truth, those conceptions that understand truth as the limit of justification are typically understood as “antirealist” or “epistemic” notions of truth
- The more verificationist tradition is committed to anti-realist notions of truth. (Misak 1995) Oversimplifying:
  - Logical Empiricists (Schlick, Carnap, Waismann), “the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification”. Unverifiable statements are not meaningful.
  - Pierce\*: “Truth is what we agree on in the long run.” (quotation from Misak)
  - Dummett\*: The meaning of a statement is its method of Justification.
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# Ideal Verificationism with Realism about Truth

- But Husserl insists that it is not our capacities for knowledge that make propositions true, but states of affairs. In this sense, Husserl's early notion of truth was clearly realist, despite his commitment to ideal verificationism.
- Could Husserl's ideal verificationism offer a robust realism (with a non-epistemic, realist notion of truth), rather than stand in the verificationist tradition?
- The crucial work here seems to lie with the notion of “ideal possibility”

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# Ideal Possibilities as Logical Possibilities

- We want to take ideal possibilities to be as permissive as possible.
- But logical possibilities seem to be too permissive: it is not a matter of (formal) logic that “this car is red all over and green all over” is impossible.
- That a house is given without hidden sides remains logically possible, but we should not allow it to be ideally possible.

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# Ideal Possibilities as Metaphysical Possibilities

- the right answer seems to be that ideal possibilities are “metaphysical possibilities”
- In addition to formal logic, they are also constrained by the “natures of things”, their essential properties
- on this account: our finite consciousness exemplifies the same essential properties as any ideally possible consciousness. This is how we can know that “even for a god” the house would have to be given in adumbrations

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# Problem 1: Knowability of the mathematical domain

- The ideal knowability of all truths seems to fail already in the mathematical domain.
- If there is an ideal consciousness that knows about unprovable truths in mathematics, it would seem to be very different from us, or we would have to be very optimistic about future systems of axiomatization.
- (But I will leave a discussion of Gödel for another day)

## Problem 2: The Paradox of Knowability

- this is a general logical problem, for both readings of ideal possibility
- Assume that Intuitive givenness entails knowledge ( $IG(p) \rightarrow K(p)$ )
- Assume that knowing a conjunction entails knowing both conjuncts ( $K(p \wedge q) \rightarrow K(p) \wedge K(q)$ )
- Assume that only truths can be known ( $K(p) \rightarrow p$ )
- Then the knowability thesis

$$p \rightarrow \Diamond K(p)$$

- contradicts the idea that at least one proposition is, was and will never be known:

$$q \wedge \neg K(q)$$

- From this it follows that all true propositions are, were, or will be *in fact* known by someone - which might be fine for an idealist? (Williamson 2000) (Salerno 2009)

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## Problem 3: expanding possibilities, shrinking necessities

- there is a more specific phenomenological problem with ideal possibilities. It derives from the duality of possibility and necessity.
  - That is something is necessary means that it is impossible that it is not.  
 $(\Box A \Leftrightarrow \neg \Diamond \neg A)$
  - That something is possible means that it is not necessarily not  $\Diamond A \Leftrightarrow \neg \Box \neg A$

This creates a tension in the interpretation of ideal possibilities:

- Ideal possibilities:
  - cannot be too liberal, because otherwise phenomenological claims are not necessarily true
  - cannot be too restrictive, because otherwise, correlationism fails.

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# What is your reaction?

I am interested in how you would react - feel free to drop one of the following options in the chat:

- 1 The logical problems are problems for logicians, and truth and metaphysical possibility will fit together just right.
- 2 Phenomenology should be metaphysically neutral.
- 3 Realism can accept an epistemic notion of truth.
- 4 Realist phenomenological claims (like “physical things are given in adumbrations”) are no necessary truths.
- 5 Realist Phenomenology should abandon correlationism.
- 6 The debate can be undermined. (How?)
- 7 I know what to think about this, and it is something else.
- 8 I am confused.

# References

Grateful for any comments and criticism: [gregor.boes@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:gregor.boes@kcl.ac.uk)

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