

“... THE FUNDAMENTAL PLATONIC TENET ...”
MAXIMILIAN BECK’S *IDEENLEHRE* WITHIN
THE CONTEXT OF EARLY PHENOMENOLOGY¹

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Abstract

The present paper is dedicated to the work of Maximilian Beck, a neglected member of the Munich circle of phenomenology. It will present the main characteristics of his doctrine of ideas by putting it back into the context of early phenomenology. Beck’s doctrine of ideas can be seen as a radicalization of some of the early phenomenological realist tendencies toward the recognition of an objective existence of ideas. However, it can also be regarded as an attempt to reject one of the main claims of early phenomenologists, namely, that ideas have an internal structure and content.

Keywords: Maximilian Beck; Edmund Husserl; Early Phenomenology; Theory of Ideas; Platonism; Phenomenological Ontology

1. Introducing Maximilian Beck

Maximilian Beck was a student of Alexander Pfänder in Munich and could therefore be classified, at least *de facto*, as a member of the Munich phenomenological circle. I write *de facto* because here I cannot address the question how the phrase “Munich phenomenological circle” should properly be understood in order to

¹ This work was supported by the Czech Sciences Foundation, financing the project “Rediscovering a German-Czech Member of Early Phenomenology: Intentionality, Consciousness and the Mind in the Philosophy of Maximilian Beck” (GAČR 24-10611S).

assess *the extent to which* Beck shares some of the philosophical concerns, problems, or doctrines that one might associate with that “circle”?

Beck was born on February 14th, 1887 in Plzeň or Pilsen (in Western Czech Republic), where he studied at the *deutsche Volksschule* and at the *Staatsgymnasium*. He graduated with Pfänder in 1915 with a dissertation about the problem of the “implication-relations” between judgments (*Inwiefern können in einem Urteil andere Urteile impliziert sein?*). In 1928, Beck began to publish a self-financed journal – the *Philosophische Hefte* – where he would publish most of his own writings from the late 20s and 30s, and to whose issues many important authors would contribute over the years – Oskar Kraus, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Karl Löwith, and Herbert Marcuse, Paul F. Linke, Jacques Maritain, and Herbert Spiegelberg. After Hitler seized power, Beck left Berlin and moved to Prague where he lived until 1938, when he had to leave Europe for the United States. There Beck taught in various institutions until his death in 1950. His *Nachlass* is preserved at the Bavarian State Library (Ana 354).

If in the opening pages of *Wesen und Wert*, Beck thanks his Munich master Alexander Pfänder for having “facilitated him, in an essential way, in the struggle against modern subjectivism”,³ in a footnote to a paper published in Beck’s *Philosophische Hefte*, Hedwig Conrad-Martius speaks of “the philosophical struggle against gnoseological idealism, which the editor of this journal has already been waging for many years, and in a completely independent way”.⁴ In effect, most of Beck’s philosophical efforts consists – especially in the 20s and 30s – in uncompromisingly rejecting and dismissing all forms of subjectivism and transcendental philosophy, including the “return to Kant” that characterizes phenomenology (of the Husserlian/Heideggerian variety⁵). They all are accused of falsifying the

² See Kuhn, Helmuth; Avé-Lallement, Eberhard; Gladiator, Reinhold (eds.), *Die Münchener Phänomenologie*, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1975; Smid, Reinhold Nikolaus: “Münchener Phänomenologie. Zur Frühgeschichte des Begriffs,” in Spiegelberg, Herbert; Avé-Lallement, Eberhard (eds.), *Pfänder-Studien*, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1982, pp. 109–144. See also the recent Mäcklin, Harri: “Editor’s Introduction: Rediscovering Early Phenomenological Aesthetics,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, 10, 2 (2023), pp. 95–108, here pp. 99–100, where Beck’s contribution to (objective) aesthetics is mentioned.

³ Beck, Maximilam: *Wesen und Wert. Grundlegung einer Philosophie des Daseins I-II*, Grethlein, Berlin 1925, p. xv.

⁴ Conrad-Martius, Hedwig: “Bemerkungen über die Metaphysik und ihre methodische Stellung”, in *Philosophische Hefte*, III, 3/4 (1932), pp. 101–124, here p. 121. (Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.)

⁵ See, for example, Beck, Maximilliam: “Referat und Kritik von Martin Heidegger: ‘Sein und Zeit’”, in *Philosophische Hefte*, I, 1 (1928), pp. 5–44; “Der phänomenologische Idealismus, die phänomenologische Methode und die Hermeneutik”, in *Philosophische Hefte*, III, 1 (1930), pp. 97–101. On these topics, let me refer the readers to De Santis, Daniele: “Maximilian Beck and Martin Heidegger:

authentic sense of knowledge and denying the objective determination of being. *Positively* speaking, Beck strives toward developing a form of “naïve realism” (his expression⁶) that hinges upon a series of systematically interwoven claims and theses: an objective concept of knowledge (“as the grasping of something that exists in itself, that is to say, independently from the acts of grasping, which then presuppose such an existing something”⁷); the essential distinction between “consciousness” and *Seele* (mind); the thesis that intentionality belongs to the latter but not to the former and that it consists in the mind’s attitudes toward the world as is objectively given to consciousness⁸; and an objective conception of “perspectives” or *Abschattungen* (as real and objectively ascertainable determinations of the world⁹). Last but not least, his realism also builds on a defense of the “fundamental Platonic tenet” that there are objective (abstract) ideas or essences. Beck originally planned to dedicate the last book of a *six-book philosophical project* to this issue; here I will focus only on this topic, thus leaving aside the other aspects of his multifaceted realism.

According to the plan outlined in *Wesen und Wert* (which represents Book I) – in which a theory of perception and representation is laid out in connection with the problem of the reality of beauty – such an ambitious project was expected to include the following volumes:

- Book II: The Reality of Life, or the Pleasure
- Book III: The Reality of Mind/Soul (*Seele*), or the Joy
- Book IV: The Reality of Spirit, or the (Moral) Good
- Book V: Metaphysics, or the Philosophy of Being-Real
- Book VI: Logic, or the Philosophy of Ideas (“Essences”)¹⁰

Although Beck never actually published any of these five books, he managed to address and tackle almost all the topics hinted at by their titles in a series of works. The topic of Book II is covered by the still unpublished *Biologie* (Ana 354, A 1); the

A Forgotten Episode of the Early Phenomenological Tradition – Reconstruction and Interpretation”, in *Methodos. Savoirs et textes*, 23 (2023). The text is fully available online: <https://journals.openedition.org/methodos/10036>.

⁶ Beck, Maximilian: “Rehabilitierung des naiven Realismus”, *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*, Ana 354, A II 4. (All transcriptions of Beck’s unpublished texts are mine.)

⁷ Beck, Maximilian: “Erkenntnistheoretische Auseinandersetzung”, in *Philosophische Hefte*, II, 2 (1930), p. 102.

⁸ Beck, Maximilian: *Psychologie. Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Seele*, A. W. Sijthoff, Leiden 1938.

⁹ Beck: *Wesen und Wert I*, op. cit., Chapter 1, §4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

problem of the relation between consciousness and the mind (Book III and IV) is addressed by the 1938 *Psychologie*. The problem of the moral good is covered by an essay published in the *Philosophische Hefte*¹¹ as well as by two still unpublished typescripts: “Metaphysik der Moral” (A 2) and “Value Theory and Ethics” (A 3). As far as I know, the only place in which the topic of Book V is addressed is *Wesen und Wert*, Volume II, Third Chapter, §3;¹² on the contrary, the topic of Book VI is discussed in a long two-part essay published in the *Philosophische Hefte* called “Ideeelle Existenz”.¹³ But the question of the objective existence of ideas is always present in Beck’s production, and there is almost no essay in which he does not hint at it. Moreover, in the 40s, he composed a typescript called “Science and Universals” where some of the insights from “Ideeelle Existenz” are discussed once again.

“Ideeelle Existenz” was published in the two issues of the 1929 volume of the *Philosophische Hefte*, both of which are thematically dedicated to the problem of “universals”. It is likely to assume that this essay had already been completed in 1927. From a still unpublished letter from Pfänder to Beck, we learn that the original title was “Attempt at a New Foundation of the Doctrine of Ideas” (*Versuch einer Neubegründung der Ideenlehre*). However, Pfänder polemically points out to his former student that “Under the title ‘A New Foundation of the Doctrine of Ideas’, one would expect something more than a treatise merely about the ‘objective existence of ideas’”.¹⁴ This comment might have been the reason why Beck eventually published it with the less ambitious title “Ideeelle Existenz”. In June 1927, a month after Pfänder’s letter, Beck wrote to Husserl about an essay called *Von der objektiven Existenz der Idee*, with the hope that it could be published in the *Jahrbuch*.¹⁵ Not having the full exchange, we do not know what Husserl answered and why the essay was not published in the *Jahrbuch*.

This paper will present some of the central tenets of Beck’s doctrine of ideas with a special focus upon the following topics: the nature of ideas; the foundation of essential laws; and the problem of the distinction between factual and

¹¹ Beck, Maximilian: “Ethik”, in *Philosophische Hefte*, V, 1/2 (1936), pp. 1–42. See the only available study so far by Ferrer, Urbano: “Grundlinien der Ethik von Maximilian Beck”, in *Studia Elckie*, 14 (2012), pp. 69–80.

¹² Beck: *Wesen und Wert II*, *op. cit.*, pp. 544–603.

¹³ Beck, Maximilian: “Ideeelle Existenz”, in *Philosophische Hefte*, I, 3 (1929), pp. 151–196; II, 4 (1929), pp. 197–239.

¹⁴ Pfänder, Alexander: “Brief an Maximilian Beck” (22.V.1927), *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*, Ana 354, C II, p. 1.

¹⁵ Beck, Maximilian: “Brief an Edmund Husserl (16.VI.1927)”, in Husserl, Edmund, *Briefwechsel. Band II: Die Münchener Phänomenologen*, Hua-Dok III/2, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1994, p. 9.

essential sciences. It is accordingly divided into two parts. The first part provides an overview of some of the most important views on ideas in early phenomenology. In this way the reader will be in a position to appreciate the peculiarities of Beck's own theory. The second part will be dedicated to Beck himself and his *Ideenlehre*.¹⁶

2. Ideas and essences in early phenomenology: An overview

2.1 From Husserl to Hering ...

In the opening page of his groundbreaking 1921 “Remarks on Essence, Essentiality, and the Idea”, Jean Hering speaks of a “a basic tenet, recognized in like manner [...] by all phenomenologically oriented philosophers: the existence of non-empirical givennesses that make the so-called a priori research possible”. Yet as he also hastens to point out, “opinions concerning the essence of these objects still diverge widely”¹⁷ Hering is right when he claims that the acceptance of non-empirical objects is one of those fundamental “tenets” (or *the fundamental tenet*¹⁸) equally recognized by all phenomenologically oriented philosophers. He is also equally right when he denounces the confusion that hovers over the phenomenological attempts at classifying them (*How many kinds of non-empirical objects are there?*)

¹⁶ For the sake of space, all epistemological problems, e.g., that of the possibility of ideation or eidetic intuition, will be left out of my discussion. For a different account, see Fréchette, Guillaume: “Essential Laws: On Ideal Objects and their Properties in Early Phenomenology”, in Leclercq, Bruno; Richard, Sébastien; Seron, Denis (eds.), *Objects and Pseudo-Objects: Ontological Deserts and Jungles from Brentano to Carnap*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2015, pp. 143–166.

¹⁷ Hering, Jean: “Bemerkungen über das Wesen, die Wesenheit, und die Idee”, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, IV (1921), pp. 495–543, here p. 495; English trans. by A. Szyłewicz: “Remarks on Essence, Ideal Quality and Idea”, in *Phenomenological Investigations* 1 (2021), pp. 51–108, here p. 54 [translation modified]. In the following, I will always translate *Wesenheit* as *essentiality* because this is closer to the original term. I regard the use of “ideal quality” (suggested by Ingarden, Roman: “Jean Hering”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 27, 2 (1966), p. 309) to translate *Wesenheit* as a potential mistake. Hering would object that there are no such things as ideal *qualities*. A quality is always the quality of something (= X’s quality), whether of an individual-empirical object (this rose) or of an individual-ideal object (a number): it is always part of a *Wesen*. The hypothesis of translating *Wesenheit* as “ideal quality” would imply that there are qualities that are qualities of nobody or nothing!

¹⁸ This holds good at least until the appearance in 1927 of the first part of Hans Lipps’s *Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis. Das Ding und seine Eigenschaften*, in which a very critical stance is taken against the concept of ideality in Husserl and Hering on the basis of a pragmatic view of language (Calenge, Simon: *Les logiques herméneutiques: Hans Lipps, Georg Misch, Josef König, Martin Heidegger*, PUS, Villeneuve d’Ascq 2020).

and characterizing them (*What are they?*). Hering's case is a most paradigmatic one. Not only does he strive toward classifying the many different types of non-empirical objects, he makes an effort to reconcile his ontological distinctions with those deployed by Husserl in the period of time that runs from the *Logical Investigations* to *Ideas I*. One could then start off with the *Logical Investigations* and their doctrine of idealities, since the book can serve as a starting point to sketch a (very) brief history of phenomenology *sub specie idearum*. Beck himself regards it as the first "breach" (*Bresche*) against all attempts to do away with "universals": "Since then, the old dispute [over the nature of universals] has actually been reignited".¹⁹

One should never get tired of emphasizing that the doctrine of "ideal being" is introduced by Husserl at the outset of the *Second Logical Investigation* as a gnoseological doctrine: "To talk of 'idealism' is of course not to talk of a metaphysical doctrine, but of a theory of knowledge which recognizes the 'ideal' as a condition for the possibility of objective knowledge in general, and does not 'interpret it away' in psychologistic fashion".²⁰ That the *idealism* of the *Logical Investigations* should not be mistaken for a "metaphysical doctrine" is no rhetorical statement upon the part of Husserl; it means, literally, that it does not concern the structure and nature of "real actuality" (*reale Wirklichkeit*) (as Husserl says in the *Prolegomena*, §5²¹). Rather, being a gnoseological theory, this idealism bears upon the irreducible difference between types of judgments and their relevant states of affairs. Such difference is at once *logical* (concerning the meanings constituting the judgment), *ontological* (concerning the objects), and *psychological* (concerning the acts that intend the objects and bring them to intuition). As Husserl says, "Singular judgments divide into *individually singular* judgments such as *Socrates is a man*, and *specifically singular* judgments such as *Two is an even number*. Universal judgments divide into *individually universal* judgments such as *All men are mortal* and *specifically universal* judgments such as *All analytic functions can be differentiated* or *All propositions of pure logic are a priori*".²² As Husserl also succinctly writes in §8 of the *Second Investigation*, "if these truths [truths that concern, for example, the number 2, the quality of redness, the principle of contradiction] hold, everything presupposed as an object [*objektiv*] by their validity must have a being".²³

¹⁹ Beck: "Ideelle Existenz", *op. cit.*, p. 155.

²⁰ Husserl, Edmund: *Logische Untersuchungen*, Hua XIX/1, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1984, p. 112; English trans. by J. N. Findlay, ed. D. Moran: *Logical Investigations. Volume I*, Routledge, London, and New York 2001, p. 238.

²¹ See Trizio, Emiliano: "Husserl's Early Concept of Metaphysics as the Ultimate Science of Reality", in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, XVII (2019), pp. 309–330.

²² Husserl: *Logische Untersuchungen*, *op. cit.*, p. 116; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 241.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 130; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 250.

If a judgment is true, then the object of which it affirms something must also be: “no offense will be given to one who has first used such talk [of universal objects] merely to assert the validity of certain judgments, such in fact as concern numbers, propositions, geometrical forms”.²⁴ The notion of *ideality* deployed here by Husserl is very broad and embraces at least: (a) the ideality of (conceptual/propositional) meanings that realize themselves in the individual matter of a corresponding act; (b) the ideality of specifically yet individual objects: e.g., the number 2, Pythagoras theorem; (c) the ideality of specifically yet universal objects: e.g., redness or the Red.²⁵

It is important to keep in mind that Husserl is not so much interested in the distinction between *a*, *b*, and *c*, but is more generally concerned with the distinction between the spheres of reality and ideality as such, and the different types of judgments referring to each of them. Regarding what concerns the distinction between real being and ideal being, Husserl confines himself to a minimal characterization: “What is real is the *individuum* with all its components; it is something here and now. For us temporality is a sufficient mark of reality”.²⁶ *Per viam oppositionis*, one could describe the ideal sphere as marked by neither temporality nor position in space. And if the domain of reality is inhabited by *individua* or concrete individuals (an individual lived experience; an individual thing) having components, the ideal sphere contains neither *individua* nor components.

One should never forget that despite the fact that Husserl’s position in the *Logical Investigations* is often described by scholars as a form of “Platonism”, Husserl’s references to Plato are all dismissive and critical. Husserl talks of the *Missdeutungen* of “Platonizing realism”,²⁷ and toward the end of the *First Logical Investigation*, he had already famously remarked: “Meanings constitute, we may say further, a class of concepts in the sense of ‘universal objects’. They are not for that reason objects which, though existing nowhere in the world, have being in a *τόπος οὐράνιος* or in a divine mind, for such metaphysical hypostatization is absurd”.²⁸ Here the reference is to *Phaedrus* (247 C). But whereas Socrates speaks of “the region above the heaven” (*ὑπερουράνιος τόπος*) – where *τὰ ὄντα ὄντως* are – Husserl misspeaks (intentionally or unintentionally) of a *τόπος οὐράνιος*,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 230.

²⁵ An important introduction to these problems can still be found in Millán-Puelles, Antonio: *El problema del ente ideal. Un examen a través de Husserl y Hartmann*, Instituto Luis Vives de filosofía, Madrid 1947, Chaps. II, III.

²⁶ Husserl: *Logische Untersuchungen*, *op. cit.*, p. 129; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 249.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 249 (translation modified).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 230.

of “a region of the heaven” (as one could translate such a phrase), where his own ideas and universal objects are not and cannot be. It is not Husserl who first labeled his own position as Platonic or Platonist. The label was first employed by some of his critics to attribute to him a form of unresolved ontological dualism (Paul Natorp); the thesis that there are objects with timeless existence (Anton Marty); or the claim that “universal concepts or objects exist in some form” (Ernst von Aster).²⁹

Faced with these criticisms, Husserl will rebut them primarily by appropriating the very label “Platonism”. From right after the *Logical Investigations* all the way to the first volume of *Ideas* and beyond, Husserl will never get tired of responding to his critics by describing the peculiar nature of his Platonic idealism with the following words: “Objects and predicable subjects are equivalents. All logic would come to an end if the concept of ‘object’ were not conceived in as broad a sense as this equivalence demands – that is, if one did not also allow ‘ideas’ to count as objects”.³⁰ It is a quite *minimal logical-ontological definition of Platonism*. Thus not only is the “Platonism” of the *Logical Investigations* in need of a more fine-grained terminology that is able to do justice to the richness of the ideal sphere, it does not elucidate the mode of being of ideas. In fact, besides the claim that they count as objects, all we are told about them and their being is *what or how they are not*. In this respect, the history of (Husserlian) phenomenology after the *Logical Investigations* is a series of attempts to answer two questions: How should ideas be better characterized? How many kinds of ideal objects can be distinguished?

Husserl addresses the second question in almost all the lectures given after the publication of the *Logical Investigations*. The “ideality” of meanings will be slowly but sharply distinguished from the ideality of universal objects such as the species “red” (or redness), just as the term essence (*Wesen*) will be increasingly separated from the “idea” and the Greek *eidos*.³¹ The result of such a long process of conceptual and terminological refinement is the more fine-grained framework presented right at the beginning of *Ideas*. For the sake of brevity, Husserl’s major distinctions here could be summarized as follows. To every individual object (technically called “individuum”) there belongs an “essence” (*Wesen*), whose primary meaning is

²⁹ Natorp, Paul: “Zur Frage der logischen Methode”, in *Kant Studien*, 6, 1–3 (1901), pp. 270–283; Marty, Anton: *Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der allgemeinen Grammatik und Sprachphilosophie I*, Max Niemeyer, Halle 1908, pp. 337ff.; Von Aster, Ernst: *Prinzipien der Erkenntnislehre. Versuch einer Neubegründung des Nominalismus*, Verlag von Quelle und Meyer, Leipzig 1913, pp. 34–51.

³⁰ Husserl, Edmund: *Logische Untersuchungen. Ergänzungsband. Erster Teil*, Hua XX/1, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Den Haag 2002, p. 283.

³¹ De Santis, Daniele: *Husserl and the A Priori: Phenomenology and Rationality*, Springer, Cham 2022, pp. 110–124.

“what is to be found in the being that is proper to an individuum as its *what*”.³² As such, it is unrepeatable and un-sharable. A *Wesen* is always “individual” (it is the *what* of such and such an individuum). By contrast, Husserl employs the Greek *eidos* (or *pure essence*) to designate the universal levels, from the universals of the lowest level all the way up to the supreme genera and the “regions of being” (which are instantiated in and as such and such an individuum). *Eide* are distinguished into abstract and concrete: whereas the former designate non-independent essences, the latter are independent instead. Only universals of the lowest level can be “concrete” (hence called *concreta*), “since species and genera [...] are in principle dependent”³³ One can then parse Husserl’s position in *Ideas I* as follows: every *individuum* has an individual essence (*Wesen*) that consists in the individualization of a *concretum*, which in turn includes a system of abstract (specific, generic, and regional) *eide*.

However, Husserl’s position is not without ambiguities. For instance, the term “*Wesen*” is used to designate both the individual essence (of an individuum *hic et nunc*) and the universal *eide* (also called “pure essences”). Likewise, the term “idea” is employed not only to refer to the “idea in Kantian sense”, but also to describe the objectual correlate of the intuition of essence.³⁴

It is precisely with the aim of contributing to the clarification of these ontological-terminological distinctions (*essence/eidos/idea*) that Hering publishes his booklet. In a footnote to the third chapter of the text, he remarks: “Husserl wants to reserve the term ‘idea’ for idea in the *Kantian* sense; but since we employed the term ‘*eidos*’ for the essentiality – not without good reason as we hope to have shown – we feel compelled to invoke once again Husserl’s earlier terminology”³⁵ This text is important in that it tells us *how Hering sees the relation* between his terminology and Husserl’s: what Husserl calls *eidos* corresponds to what Hering calls *idea*, for since Hering employs the term *eidos* to designate what he also calls *essentiality* (which does not seem to be present in Husserl), he had to resort to a different term to refer to what Husserl calls *eidos*. Hence, he decides to refer to the idea according to “Husserl’s earlier terminology” (by which expression I assume he means the *Logical Investigations*). Moreover, the very fact that Hering does not feel the need to mention the “essence” (which he had already addressed in the first

³² Husserl, Edmund: *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch*, Hua III/1, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag 1976, p. 13; English trans. by D. Dahlstrom: *Ideas I*, Hackett, Indianapolis 2014, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 35; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁴ See Husserl: *Ideen I*, *op. cit.*, p. 13; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁵ Hering: “Bemerkungen”, *op. cit.*, p. 533; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 91 (translation modified).

chapter of the booklet) can only mean that he does not see any difference between the manner he uses it and Husserl's (Fig. 1).³⁶

Hering	Husserl
Idea (<i>Idee</i>)	Idea (<i>Logical Investigations</i>) = Eidos (<i>Ideas I</i>)
Eidos = Essentiality	×
Essence (<i>Wesen</i>)	Essence = The <i>What</i> of an Individuum

Figure 1: The Husserl-Hering Relation

The claim that Hering uses the term “essence” in exactly the same sense as Husserl does not need any particular justification. It would suffice to look closely at the opening pages of the booklet to find Hering quoting and referring – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – to Husserl’s own account of the *Wesen* (which does not necessarily mean that Husserl would agree with him *sic et simpliciter* and with all his arguments).³⁷ As Hering writes, “*Every object* (no matter what its mode of being may be) has *one and only one essence*, which, as its essence, makes up the fullness of the specific character constituting it”.³⁸ For lack of space, I cannot address all the different aspects of Hering’s ontology. Let me just remark that by essence, he means a system of properties that present themselves as the “realization” – in the individual object’s own *Wesen* – of a series of corresponding non-individual essentialities (also called $\epsilon\iota\delta\eta$). Better said, non-individual $\epsilon\iota\delta\eta$ realize themselves in the individual $\mu\omega\varphi\alpha\iota$ that make up the properties of the individual object’s essence.

³⁶ Here I am not considering Wilhelm Schapp’s influence on Hering; see Nuccilli, Daniele: “Species, Ideas, and Stories: Schapp between Phenomenological Platonism and Anti-Platonism”, in *Azimuth* VII, 15 (2020), pp. 61–76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 496–497; English trans., *op. cit.*, pp. 55–57. As is clear, here I am confining my attention to the term *Wesen*, without considering what Husserl calls “pure essence”.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 497; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 57 (translation modified).

Contrary to what one might expect, the objects of the famous intuition of essence and ideation are not, according to Hering, $\varepsilon\delta\eta$, but rather “ideas” or $\iota\delta\epsilon\alpha$.³⁹ In short, if this individual red rose *hic et nunc*, with its individual essence, is given in perception, the act of ideation gives the *idea* red rose. And whereas $\varepsilon\delta\eta$ realize themselves in the components of the object’s essence, the $\iota\delta\epsilon\alpha$ (“red rose”) “individualizes” itself in a series of individual red roses *hic et nunc*. To use an expression first coined by Ingarden, $\varepsilon\delta\eta$ are given only as the *content* of ideas. Otherwise said, $\varepsilon\delta\eta$ make up the content of ideas, and insofar as ideas individualize themselves in individual objects (“individua”, in Husserl’s jargon), a system of $\varepsilon\delta\eta$ realize itself in the object’s $\mu\sigma\varphi\alpha\iota$, thereby constituting its *Wesen*.

This being recognized, two major cases should be distinguished. The first is what Hering calls “inauthentic $\mu\sigma\varphi\alpha\iota$ ”. This is the case when the connections between the $\mu\sigma\varphi\alpha\iota$ making up the essence are only “contingent”: the $\mu\sigma\varphi\alpha\iota$ happen to be empirically connected together in an individual object, yet to such individual connection there corresponds no connection at the level of non-empirical $\varepsilon\delta\eta$. For example, the $\mu\sigma\varphi\alpha\iota$ “horse” and “domesticated animal” are empirically connected together in an individual animal’s essence (a domesticated horse), yet there is no non-empirical connection at the eidetic level. Hering also speaks here of a “conglomerate of $\mu\sigma\varphi\alpha\iota$ ".⁴⁰ The case is different when we consider the relation, say, between “color” and “extension”. Here the relation takes place not only at the empirical level of the individual object, but already at the eidetic level: for example, the $\varepsilon\delta\omega\varsigma$ “color” “necessarily demands” the $\varepsilon\delta\omega\varsigma$ “extension” and vice versa.⁴¹ This distinction allows me to make the following remarks.

(A) *The $\varepsilon\delta\omega\varsigma$ - $\iota\delta\epsilon\alpha$ distinction.* Even if to a certain objectual connection in the individual object there corresponds no eidetic relation, this does not mean that there is no corresponding idea either. For example, there is no $\varepsilon\delta\omega\varsigma$ “horse” (no *horseness*), yet there is the idea “horse”: “There appears to be no sphere of entities whatsoever that would not have its ideas; no matter how we may wish to partition the entities, there will never be anything that will not be followed by its idea as its own shadow”⁴² Even the manners in which Hering describes these two objectualities differ. Every idea is “ $\grave{\alpha}\gamma\acute{e}\nu\nu\eta\tau\varsigma$, $\grave{\alpha}\nu\grave{\omega}\acute{\lambda}\epsilon\theta\tau\varsigma$, $\grave{\alpha}\kappa\acute{\i}\nu\eta\tau\varsigma$ ”,⁴³ but Hering goes so far as to write that the Aristotelian term “primary substance” should be applied

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 527; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 522; English trans., *op. cit.*, pp. 81 (translation modified).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 512–513; English trans., *op. cit.*, pp. 72–73.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 526; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 528; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 86.

only to the εἰδη: “If there were no essentialities, there would be no objects; [...] The essentialities are the ultimate *conditions for the possibility of objects, and of their very selves*. [...] The essentiality, and it alone, is a ΠΡΩΤΗ ΟΥΣΙΑ”.⁴⁴ Εἰδη are what they are, Hering says, “whether there are in general real and ideal worlds of objects. We can think them without the world”.⁴⁵ Yet the reader would look in vain for any sort of elucidation of the difference between the εἶδος being regardless of the world and the idea’s being ἀγέννητος and ἀνώλεθρος.

(B) *The problem of essential and a priori connections*. As Hering writes, “Laws that govern the essence of objects, in the sense of laws that are grounded in the essence of a real or ideal object, always refer back [...] to *relations among essentialities*”.⁴⁶ A priori statements or propositions such as “It belongs to the essence of ...” or “It is grounded in the essence of ...” receive their truth by virtue not of individual essences, but of εἰδη. It is the connections between essentialities that ground the talk of a priori laws that rule over the individual essences in whose *Sosein* they are realized.

Now not only does Hering intend with *A* and *B* to put Husserl’s distinctions in order, he also sets the stage for all subsequent discussions about the ontology of ideas. In fact, depending on whether we single out *A* or *B* as a *Leitfaden*, two different lines can be pursued.

If we take *A*, then a history of early phenomenology can be written in which the main difference is between those who accept Hering’s distinction between *essentialities* and *ideas*, and those who do not accept it and go so far as to reject even the concept of essentiality. The former group includes Roman Ingarden, Edith Stein, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Wilhelm Reyer, and Wilhelm Pöll; the latter includes Arnold Metzger and Herbert Spiegelberg. In all such cases, however, it is admitted that *ideas* are structured and have a “content” (*Gehalt*) (even “simple ideas” – such as the idea “point”⁴⁷ – have a content, albeit simple). As we will see, *Beck* belongs to neither of these two factions: he adamantly refuses to regard ideas as having a structure or content (no matter what it would consist of). If one chooses *B* instead, one can compose a history that rests upon the difference between those who argue that a priori relations hold between universal objects prior to their instantiations (and regardless of whether such universal objects are essentialities or

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 510–511; English trans., *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71 (translation modified).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* (translation modified).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 524; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 83 (translation modified).

⁴⁷ See Ingarden, Roman: “Essentielle Fragen. Ein Beitrag zu dem Wesensproblem”, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, VII (1925), pp. 125–304, here pp. 230–231.

ideas) and those who in contrast contend that no such relations hold. The former group includes all the above figures; the second includes, as far as I know, only Beck, his view of *B* being a direct consequence of his stance regarding *A*.

Having anticipated this, let us briefly go over some of these phenomenologists.

2.2 ... and beyond!

Ingarden is the first who attempts to develop Hering's own insights further and to systematize them. For the sake of this paper, the most important concept he introduces is that of "the idea's content" and the distinction between "constant" and "variable" content: "The structure of the idea displays an incredible duality: on the one hand, there is the structure of the idea *qua* idea; on the other, there is the *content* of the idea, that in which the relation to possible individual objects is grounded".⁴⁸ Taking the example of an individual material object (a ink bottle on the table right now), Ingarden distinguishes the following two groups in the content of the idea. As a *constant content*, Ingarden lists (a) the ideal correlates of all the formal-analytical structures of the object in general; (b) all the formal moments of the "objectual domain" to which it belongs; (c) its mode of being; (d) the full qualitative determination of the object (e.g., its having a determined size, color, shape, and the like). In contrast, the *variable content* includes (e) the time-space localization; (f) the object's *modus existentiae*; and (g) its individuation-moment.⁴⁹ The case of the idea of "a small ink bottle" on this table can thus be described in the following way: it must include all the formal conditions of the object in general (a), as well as all the conditions that make an object in general, say, a cultural object (b); it includes the mode of being of the object as a real object (c), having a series of qualitatively fixed determinations (d): it is olive green, with a certain size, shape, and material. In contrast, the idea's variable content includes its being here and now on this table, but having the possibility of being moved to a different here and now (e); the fact that this is a real object that actually "exists" and it is not simply imagined (f) (as is the case, for example, with the idea of a real yet fictitious ink bottle employed by a fictional character in a novel); it is just one individual ink bottle among many other identical ones (g) (= the idea is individualized in *this* bottle just as it could be individualized in *that* bottle over there).

Drawing upon Ingarden (but also going beyond him), Herbert Spiegelberg develops a very complex picture of the content of the ideas. He accepts the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 176–177.

constant/variable content distinction, yet for him such a distinction intersects with the one between “mandatory” or “obligatory” (*obligatorische*) and “optional” or “arbitrary” (*fakultative*) components.⁵⁰ Taking the idea “triangle”, he explains the relations between the components as follows: in order for any object to be a “right-angled triangle” (to instantiate the idea “right-angled triangle”), it has to display at least one obligatory (necessary) and constant (determined) element (the “right angle”). What is mandatory is also the presence of a group of *alternative elements*: all the possible combinations between the remaining sides following upon the presence of the right angle. It is always *mandatory* that there obtains at least one constant element; it is always possible that there are some *mandatory-alternative elements*. In addition, there can be *optional-alternative elements* as well as *constant-alternative elements*. The sum-total of the obligatory + constant components yields the core of the idea’s content, around which the remaining components organize themselves as obligatory-alternative, as optional-constant, or as optional-alternative.⁵¹

Notwithstanding the similarity between Ingarden and Spiegelberg (and the complexity the latter adds to the former’s picture), there is one major difference between the two that cannot be ignored. While Ingarden accepts Hering’s essentialities (determining the contents of ideas), Spiegelberg is very skeptical: “I cannot find a place for the alleged phenomenon of the essentiality. It goes without saying that insofar as such a formation also underpins Ingarden’s investigations, I would not know what to do with them”.⁵² But doubts about the essentialities had already been voiced by Metzger: he denounces Hering’s “mythification of the essentiality at the expense of the essence”.⁵³ Even Conrad-Martius – who accepts the essentialities – cannot help expressing a strong skepticism about Hering; she denounces the risk of “hypostatizing the essentialities by attributing to them a being that does not belong to them” and that paves the way *für einen Ideenrealismus*.⁵⁴

If I am right, at least three groups should be distinguished (*Fig. 2*).

In addition to those who understand the essentialities and $\epsilon\delta\eta$ ontologically (Hering, Ingarden) and to those who seem to reject their existence (Metzger, Spiegelberg), there are those who ascribe to them – to use Conrad-Martius’s term –

⁵⁰ Spiegelberg, Herbert: “Über das Wesen der Idee. Eine ontologische Untersuchung”, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, XI (1930), pp. 1–238, here p. 150.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–152, pp. 154–156ff.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁵³ Metzger, Arnold: “Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis. Erster Teil”, in *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, VII (1925), pp. 613–770, here p. 665.

⁵⁴ Conrad-Martius, Hedwig: *Das Sein*, Kösel Verlag, München 1957, p. 64.

a *Sinn-Sein* or a “sense”-kind of being, for they are not to be conceived of as having a “being of their own [*selbstseiend*] in close analogy with real entities”.⁵⁵ Stein too regards the essentialities as the source of “sense” and “intelligibility”.⁵⁶ Pöll (a former colleague of Spiegelberg in Munich and a student of Joseph Geyser) holds a weak variation of the ontological view: essentialities have no ontological status of their own; they are the principle of the object’s essence’s own unity, the principles on whose basis the properties of the object’s essence organize themselves in a unitary way.⁵⁷

Ideas = Structure / Content		Ideas ≠ Structure / Content
Essentialities	Without Essentialities	
Ontological View	Intelligibility View	
Jean Hering Roman Ingarden	Edith Stein H. Conrad-Martius	Arnold Metzger Herbert Spiegelberg
Wilhelm Pöll		Maximilian Beck

Figure 2: Phenomenology *sub specie idearum*

This diagram will serve as a backdrop against which Beck’s view can better be appreciated.

This being said, it is now time to present Beck’s own position.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Stein, Edith: *Endliches und ewiges Sein. Versuch eines Aufstiegs zum Sinn des Seins*, Herder, Freiburg 1962, p. 64.

⁵⁷ Pöll, Wilhelm: *Wesen und Wesenserkenntnis*, Ernst Reinahrdt, München 1936, p. 132. Wilhelm Reyer oscillates between the *Wesenheiten* as the principles structuring the ideas and as their abstract or concrete components. See Reyer, Wilhelm: *Einführung in die Phänomenologie*, Felix Meiner, Leipzig 1926, pp. 299–300ff.

3. Maximilian Beck's *Ideenlehre*

3.1 "... The fundamental Platonic tenet ..."

The essay "Ideelle Existenz" consists of three parts. The introductory part ("Apologetic Foundation of the Doctrine of Ideas") presents the reader with an initial general account of what ideas are, mainly by dismissing a series of arguments against their very existence. Here Beck is chiefly concerned with demonstrating the extent to which the arguments usually assumed against the very possibility of a theory of ideas (e.g., Bergson's thesis about the "absolute flux of reality") are based on a misconstrual of their nature. The second part ("Positive Foundation of the Doctrine of the Objective Existence of Ideas") is the most important one because it contains Beck's account of the mode of being of ideas and their objectivity. Finally, the third part, "Demonstration of the Existence of Ideas from the Fact and Meaning of Scientific Knowledge", will keep us busy toward the end of this section, for not only does Beck say here that all scientific knowledge presupposes the objective existence of ideas, but he goes so far as to contend that all (scientific) knowledge is *knowledge of ideas*.

As soon as one starts reading the essay, one important difference with respect to all the thinkers mentioned in the preceding sections immediately leaps into view. In fact, if Hering and Ingarden (but also Spiegelberg and Conrad-Martius) are incredibly concerned with carefully distinguishing (*conceptually* as well as *terminologically*) essence (by some also called being-thus), essentiality, and idea (just to mention the three we are already familiar with), this does not seem to be the case with Beck. His seemingly (or apparently) terminological/conceptual confusion was denounced by Spiegelberg himself (who was a colleague of Beck in Munich). In a footnote to the introduction to his 1930 "On the Essence of Idea", he openly denounces Beck as follows: "For [Beck], the following [terms] have all the very same meaning [*gleichbedeutend*]: essence [*Wesen*], idea, form, *essentia*, determination, essentiality, what-ness, how, being-thus, *quid*, quale, content".⁵⁸ Spiegelberg is right, and what he says is indeed a direct quotation from Beck's own *Introduction* to his essay: "Let us remark this: we list the following expressions as completely *synonymous*: essence, idea, form, *essentia*, determination, essentiality, what-ness, how, being-thus, *quid*, quale, content". However, as Beck hastens to explain, this is not because of some "terminological negligence". Quite the opposite: "we make use of this apparently very inaccurate way of speaking – *consciously and*

⁵⁸ Spiegelberg: "Über das Wesen der Idee", *op. cit.*, p. 3.

intentionally – with the aim of making perceivable, in the *clearest* way possible, what we ourselves understand by ‘idea’ as the identical original sense and *convergence point* of these various terms”⁵⁹

The idea is at once *Ursinn* and *Konvergenzpunkt*. What the idea originally meant (*Ur-Sinn*) was later divided into – and distributed among – several different terms (essence, form, essentiality ...). Each of these terms expresses something that was originally included (in an undifferentiated way) in the very meaning of the term “idea”. Now the term “idea” is used by Beck in such a way that it stands for a point toward which all the meanings of those different terms converge. For as we shall soon see, in Beck’s account, the *idea* is characterized, and works in the constitution of concrete objects, in a way that it makes sense – unitarily – of what all those terms respectively express (Fig. 3).

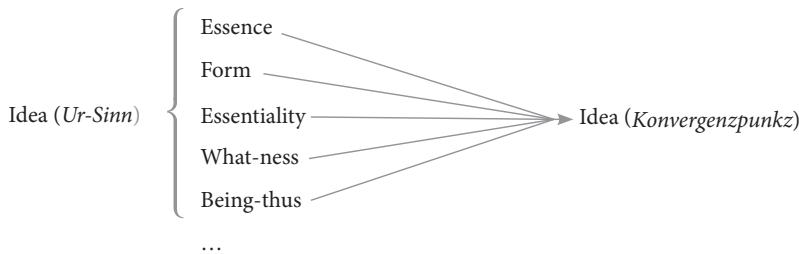


Figure 3: Beck’s “Idea”

The thesis that the term “idea” had an “original sense” has both a systematic and a historical meaning. Beck uses it with the explicit aim of reconnecting to Plato: “What holds here is – in the first place – the fundamental Platonic tenet about the independent existence of ideas, even prior to and outside of all reality”;⁶⁰ “Independently of all reality, there are objectively existing ‘essences’ as irreal entities, ‘ideas’ in the Platonic sense”⁶¹ Although Beck never refers to any of the dialogues (*Phaedo* is mentioned in passing⁶²), these lines should be taken at face value. For the sake of my problems, I could single out the following aspects of Beck’s account that map onto Plato’s.

⁵⁹ Beck: “Ideelle Existenz”, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

- I. Beck's talk of the ideas' "objective existence"⁶³ (or of their *autochthone Existenz*) corresponds to the Platonic phrase ὃν αὐτὸν καθ' αὐτό (*Phaedo* 78 D, 6–7).
- II. The Platonic tenet to the effect that the distinction between δύο εἴδη τῶν ὄντων – between what changes and what always stays the same as itself (*Phaedo*, 79 A 7) – corresponds to the difference between what is perceived by the senses (ταῖς ἄλλαις αἰσθήσεσιν αἴσθοιο) and what is grasped by reason (τῷ τῆς διανοίας λογισμῷ) (*Phaedo*, 79 A, 2–5) can be found in Beck as well. If there were no ideas, one could not even speak of "reason" (*Vernunft*) in contrast to "perception": "reason is no specific faculty of knowledge; rather, it is a knowledge that differs from all other cognitions by its *particular sphere of objects*" (= ideas and essences).⁶⁴
- III. The identity of every idea with itself is such, Beck also contends, that ideas are "beyond all numerical multiplicity": "No number [*Zahl*] expresses the numerical multiplicity [*Anzahl*] of ideas – not even the One".⁶⁵ Beck speaks of the "a-numeric" or "a-singular existence of ideas" and adds that such thesis is originally argued for by Plato in the *Parmenides*.⁶⁶
- IV. Last but not least, *the most peculiar and important aspect* of Beck's account of ideas lies in the thesis that they are "abstract" – by which Beck means, in a sense to be further elaborated, that they are "simple unities" (*simple Einheit, einfaches Was*), "elementary unities".⁶⁷ As we will soon see, all the peculiarities (and difficulties) of Beck's *Ideenlehre* derive from what one could call the *simplicity thesis*. Here Beck is not only radicalizing Husserl's statement from the *Second Investigation* (see §2.1 above) to the effect that in the ideal sphere there are no individua nor components; he is also translating into his terminology/conceptuality a series of famous distinctions made by Socrates in *Phaedo*. The distinction between what always is as itself and what changes is explained by Socrates as an opposition between what is *μονοειδὲς* (the former) and what is *πολυειδὲς* (the latter) (78 D 6; 80 B 4). They could be translated as "uniform" and "multi-form" respectively. However, since what is *πολυειδὲς* is also said to be "synthetically structured",⁶⁸ one could understand the *πολυειδὲς-μονοειδὲς*

⁶³ See *ibid.*, p. 152, and almost every other page of "Idee Existenz".

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152. See also *Wesen und Wert II*, *op. cit.*, p. 557.

⁶⁵ Beck: "Idee Existenz", *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁶⁶ Beck, Maximilian: "Plato's Problem in the *Parmenides*", in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 8, 2 (1947), pp. 232–236, here p. 235.

⁶⁷ Beck: "Idee Existenz", *op. cit.*, pp. 179, 189.

⁶⁸ *Phaedo*, 78 C 1: ἀρ' οὖν τῷ μὲν συντεθέντι τε καὶ συνθέτῳ ὄντι φύσει προσήκει τοῦτο πάσχειν, διαρεθῆναι ταύτη ἡπερ συντεθέθη: εἰ δέ τι τυγχάνει ὃν ἀσύνθετον, τούτῳ μόνῳ προσήκει μὴ πάσχειν ταῦτα, εἴπερ τῷ ἄλλῳ.

distinction as an opposition between what has a *synthetic nature* and what has an *a-synthetic* and even *simple nature* (*Phaedrus* 270 D 3 uses ἀπλοῦν). In Beck's language, while ideas are *abstract*, what is real has a *concrete* nature and is the result of a "synthesis".⁶⁹

Let me now elaborate on IV by first quoting three passages.

[Ideas] are "abstract" in opposition to what is "concrete" – with both terms to be taken at face value. Concrete (from *conresco*) means *to be grown together, to be coalesced [zusammengewachsen]*, thus to be interwoven, thick, bulky, tight. In opposition to this: to be isolated, for itself alone, untight, unbulky, pulled apart, "detached" from the connection with something else (which is the most literal meaning of abstract).

An idea is necessarily isolated, and only in this sense it is an "abstract" determination (that is to say, detached, pulled off from its growing together with other ideas).

[Ideas] are an absolutely, elementarily simple, and irreducible being-what and being-thus, and as such, independent of the pure being-real [...]. No matter how many movements, melodies, beats, and sounds a symphony is composed of, it still represents – in the realm of pure ideas or essences – a simple unity, a simple what. Only in its realization does it rise above "its" movements, melodies, beats, and sounds as their continuum.⁷⁰

These texts clarify that when Beck says that ideas are "simple" or "elementary", *he does not mean to argue that there are ideas only of simple objects, but that all ideas (even the idea of a symphony) are simple*. Beck treats of examples as diverse as a "symphony", "a stone, a table, something red", but also "triangles" or "animal

⁶⁹ Beck: "Ideelle Existenz", *op. cit.*, p. 167. Let me remark that although Husserl claims in the *Second Investigation* that the ideal sphere contains no individua and thus no *Bestandstücke*, he would never go so far as to assert that ideas are simple: in fact, ideas have moments (non-independent parts) whose connections ground the talk of a priori relations (see the *Third Investigation*, §7a from the second edition of the work). In short, lack of components simplicity. The same holds of Plato. If in dialogues such as *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* the opposition is between what is simple (ideas or forms) and what has parts (bodies), in the *Statesman* (263 D–E), the forms are structured and have parts (μέρη). See Miller, Mitchell: *The Philosopher in Plato's Statesman*, Parmenides Publishing, Las Vegas 2004.

⁷⁰ Beck: "Ideelle Existenz", *op. cit.*, pp. 157, 159, 178–179. Let me remark that in SS 1927, Husserl uses the Beckian sounding terms *Verwachsenheit* and *concrecere* to describe the structure of concrete essences (see Husserl, Edmund: *Natur und Geist. Vorlesungen 1927*, Hua XXXII, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 2001, p. 38).

bodies”: “*de jure* there is no difference between the necessity with which a triangle consists of angles and sides, and the necessity that a certain animal body consists of flesh, blood, bones, etc.”⁷¹ Yet “An essence *does not at all* ‘consist’ of parts”⁷². As far as I know, the only attempt Beck ever made to address the apparent contradiction between, say, the claim *a triangle consists of...* and the *simplicity thesis* can be found in *Wesen und Wert*:

The essence triangle is, as a peculiar unity-form and elementary essence, something that must exist – *before* the three angles and the three sides – as a peculiar what and how next to the what and how of the angles and the sides. But then do not the angles and the sides make up precisely the moments of this what and how of the triangle? No. They constitute only what, in virtue of the [triangle’s] proper nature, must be *necessarily assigned* to it; what must be *necessarily present* if a triangle is to be able to *realize* itself. However, according to *its essence*, the triangle is the how of the *combination* [*Zusammenschlusses*] of three sides and three angles into a triangle. This how of their combination is its what, its determination, its essence. *It does not have in itself* the three sides and the three angles; rather, it *only relates to them* as the superordinated unity of the *determination* of a relation between them. It is therefore hasty to understand the statement, “In virtue of its essence, a triangle consists of three angles and three sides”, as though the *essence* triangle consisted of the essences “angle” and “side”. An essence *does not at all* “consist” of parts. [...]

Earlier we said that every essence is determined from within itself and for itself, and it is then completely *without relation* to other essences. Yet we now seem to claim the opposite, i.e., that the triangle relates to the three sides and the three angles to the extent that it is the how of their relation to each other. But what we wanted to affirm is nothing other than what follows from what we just said: individual essences are inherently such that they can combine themselves into higher unities. This presupposes that they are *inherently* (*without* having to determine each other) such that they can – *if necessary* – fit and interlock with each other. [...]

[W]hen we speak of the triangle’s relation-sense, what is meant by this is not that the essence triangle relates to the essences “three”, “sides”, and “angles”. Rather, the triangle can very well have in itself, as an elementary unity, that to which its sense refers; indeed, it must have this in itself – for the “to what [Worauf?]” of the relation is just as necessarily a part of the essence of the relation as the manner of the relation itself. But as a *proper* essence, the triangle does not have in itself the three, the sides, and the angles. The *essence* triangle does not *contain* in itself the *essences* side, angle, and three. It *itself* is an essence whose immediate what and how do not consist in the *sum* of three angles and three sides, but in the peculiar *determination* of their relation to each other.

⁷¹ Beck: *Wesen und Wert II*, *op. cit.*, p. 563.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 580.

In the unity of the triangle, the angles and the sides – as peculiar essences – are just as little contained as are the sides contained in the unity of an angle or the point in the unity of a line.⁷³

Whereas the three shorter excerpts quoted earlier mainly emphasize the abstract nature of ideas in opposition to the “concrete” and synthetic character of reality (I will soon come back to this), the text just quoted strives to elucidate the *simplicity thesis*. Actually, to understand Beck’s argument, it is important not to miss the way he works with the *what/how distinction*. Consider this passage: “[...] the triangle is the how of the *combination* of three sides and three angles into a triangle. This how of their combination is its what, its determination, its essence”. *Every idea is a simple quid, and its what (Was) consists in the “modality” (Wie) a certain connection between essences is necessarily prescribed* – if and only if the *idea in question is to be realized*. The idea *triangle* is a simple *quid* (= an idea does not consist of ideas) that consists in the *way or modality* a connection between ideas or *essences*⁷⁴ (the ideas or essences *side + angle*) is necessarily prescribed (*three angles + three sides*) if and only if a *real triangle* (a concrete triangular object) is to exist. Beck also uses the expression *Beziehungssinn*: “the triangle can very well have in itself, as an elementary unity, that to which its sense refers”.⁷⁵ The term *Sinn* serves to avoid assuming that ideas have an ontologically structured “content” (Hering, Ingarden, Spiegelberg). The connections prescribed by an idea are not *contained* in it as its *content* (= the necessity does not derive from the fact that by individualizing itself, the idea brings about the realization of its content – whether consisting of essentialities or not – in the object); rather, it *refers* to them as something that must necessarily be present in “reality” if the idea is to be realized: “The unity of several ideas is not a pure idea, but a realized idea”.⁷⁶

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 579–582.

⁷⁴ Let us not forget that, as was explained earlier, Beck tends to employ “ideas” and “essences” interchangeably. However, it should be also stressed that he tends to use “idea” to mean abstract idea, and to use also “essence” (as interchangeable with “idea”) when the problem at stake is that of the (concrete) “connection” between ideas/essences.

⁷⁵ A question (or objection) could here be raised. Since Beck speaks of the idea “triangle” (in general), how would he explain the fact that the different “hows” that belong to the ideas of, say, equilateral triangle and right triangle can be explained only by appealing to the different (complex) structures inherent to these ideas? I am grateful to one of the reviewers of this paper for pointing out this problem. If I understand Beck correctly, he would argue that *equilateral triangle* and *right triangle* designate two different *simple ideas*, each of which is a *what* consisting in the *modality* a certain connection of ideas/essences is necessarily prescribed – *if and only if these ideas are to be realized*. Of course, as I have been trying to argue and will further explain later, this presupposes a distinction between ideas as abstract quidditates and as concretely realized.

⁷⁶ Beck: “*Ideelle Existenz*”, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

If my interpretation so far is correct, then we should see to what extent the claim that ideas have *an abstract nature* and the *simplicity thesis* are the two sides of the same coin, as it were. Ideas are *simple* in that no idea *contains* in itself other ideas or essences; they are *abstract* in that no idea is connected with any other ideas or essences (that of *containing* is a connection). Here the reference to *Phaedo* (see IV) becomes apparent: “Since they consist of nothing, ideas [...] cannot break down nor get corrupted. In this sense, they are ‘eternal’, undestroyable, and un-annihilable”⁷⁷

As far as I understand Beck, the (erroneous) claim that ideas have “content” is for him the result of the misleading belief that (implicitly or explicitly) assumes ideas to be the *Urbilde* of concrete things, thereby displaying their very same structure⁷⁸. In other words, the content-thesis is the result of a projection, upon the ideal sphere, of the structure of what is encountered in reality: since reality is concretely structured, the erroneous claim is derived to the effect that its *Urbilde* must also have a structure. If this is the case, what follows from Beck’s position is not only the rejection of the pillar around which most early phenomenologists built their theories of ideas; it is also a dismissal of Husserl’s talk of “moments” in connection to the ideal sphere:

[I]t looks as though there were essences that “*according to their essence*”, i.e., as essences, as such and such determinations, would be made up of other essences – for example, the body would be composed of extension, density, hardness. The truth is that the essence “body” is as little a *sum* of essential moments as, to take another example, the triangle is, according to its essence, the *sum* of its angles and sides.⁷⁹

Although Husserl is never explicitly mentioned here, it is hard to resist the temptation of reading this passage as directed against Husserl’s claim that non-independent parts (moments) require one another, and that it is precisely upon such relations that the talk of essential laws and truths builds (prior to any possible “realization”). Beck is adamant, though: “[Ideas] are not constituted by single moments”⁸⁰. As he remarks, “all essential laws in general obtain validity and intuition in general only in what is given or in the representation of an intuited *connection* of essences. It does not lie in the essence of the circle *in itself* to exclude squareness

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* He goes on as follows: “In this sense, then, Plato’s demonstration in *Phaedo* of the immortality of an absolutely simple ego-essence is still nowadays unquestionable”.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 188.

⁷⁹ Beck: *Wesen und Wert II, op. cit.*, p. 579.

⁸⁰ Beck: “*Ideelle Existenz*”, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

from itself. Rather, it lies in the essence of the circle – *in its relation to the essence square* – to exclude this from itself”.⁸¹ Only as realized does the idea *circle* exclude, as incompatible, the idea *square*: “What follows is that with the mere ideal *existence* of essences, no *connection* [whether of mutual need for completion, incompatibility, or compatibility] between essences with one another can be given”.⁸²

I would now like to bring the present section to a conclusion by addressing the problem of the *concrete nature of reality*. For if the major ontological distinction between ideas (their ideal existence) and reality is that the former are abstract/simple while the latter is concrete (“concrete (from *concreso*) means *to be grown together, to be coalesced*”) – if ideas can exist as interconnected only in reality – then the question of the *concrete nature of reality* can no longer be postponed.

The pages I will quote from can be found in *Wesen und Wert*, Volume II, Third Chapter, §3, the title of which is “The Problem of Materiality or of ‘Factual Existence’ (in Contrast to the ‘Being’ of Essences)”. The analyses offered here step over the boundaries of the doctrine of ideas and pertain to a different ontological discipline, the “doctrine of reality”⁸³ (whose subject matter is the structure of any *possible reality*). For Beck, reality is the realm of substances: “What in the substance-essence [*Substanzwesen*] is to be stressed is not the essence, but rather its hierarchy in the structure of the synthesis of essences [*Wesenssynthese*] of the concrete real thing”.⁸⁴ A *real, concrete thing* is a *synthesis of essences* that are *hierarchically structured*; one can speak of *substances* insofar as – within such *syntheses* – one among the essences (or a group thereof) *functions* as a “bearer” of the remaining ones: *substance* being nothing but a “*function in the higher whole*”. “The *hierarchy of essences*”, Beck emphasizes, is *das letzte Faktum*.⁸⁵ Let us take the case of material things:

If we are on the right track, what determines whether certain qualities represent the matter or not is *the unity of their synthesis* with certain other qualities. It is as though certain determinations *absorbed* certain other determinations into the indeterminacy [*zur Unbestimmtheit*] of the mere *substrate*: as if color, sound, smoothness, taste, smell,

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Beck: *Wesen und Wert II, op. cit.*, p. 569. In the late “Science and Universals”, Beck affirms that every *Ganzheit* is structured in such a way (= hierarchically) as to present itself as having a certain *Gestalt*. Beck, Maximilian: “Science and Universals”, *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*, Ana 354, A II 10, p. 19: “A triangle is more than the sum of three sides and angles, it is besides these elements the *Gestalt* triangle itself”.

and the like, *subjugated* extension, density, and hardness by bringing them to mutual interpenetration in the unity of mere *matter*, and by imprinting themselves on them as new determinations, as a how, as a determination of matter. [...]

Every determination is *in itself* a mere *how*, even density, hardness, and extension [...]. However, there is a *hierarchy* of the single determinations, according to which some are subordinate or superior to others when they come together to form a unity. Some become what carries and has persistent solidity, substrate, *matter* – the others become the how, the determination, the quality, the form of *this* matter.⁸⁶

In contemporary jargon, Beck rejects both bare particularism and the bundle theory. There is no such thing as an undetermined substrate (the very idea is nonsensical, because it would presuppose something to which no idea corresponds⁸⁷); yet this does not mean that there is no substance either, since a substance is nothing else than an idea or a group thereof that – within the unity of a synthesis of ideas – is subordinated to some other ideas, thereby acquiring the substance-function. The same ideas can enter into different syntheses and thus display different functions.⁸⁸

It should now be clear why for Beck the idea stands (as a *Konvergenzpunkt*) for all the terms used by his peers. If in Hering and Ingarden, ideas individualize themselves, thereby realizing their content (= systems of essentialities) in the individual object, now Beck's own claim is that ideas are simple, and the realization of a simple idea prescribes the interconnection between (other) simple ideas. If for Hering the realization of the essentialities results in a group of individual $\mu\sigma\pi\alpha\iota$, for Beck the concept of form (= the form/matter opposition) turns out to be a *function* of the synthesis of ideas. The *Wesen*, which was the alleged result of the individualization of the idea's content in or as an individual object (Hering, Ingarden), is now revealed to consist in the hierarchy of the structure of the synthesis. This is why Beck can use “idea” and “essence” interchangeably. The *functions* – which used to be ascribed to different entities (= idea, $\varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\varsigma$, form,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 553–554.

⁸⁷ See Beck: “Ideeelle Existenz”, *op. cit.*, p. 170, where Beck claims that there are no determinations without reality and no reality without determination.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167. Let me repeat, one more time, that the talk of “syntheses” and “subordination” applies exclusively to the concretization of ideas or, better: to ideas insofar as they are realized in concrete reality. As I have already pointed out, this issue belongs to the “doctrine of reality”, and not to the doctrine of ideas: whereas the latter deals with abstract ideas, the former investigates the many ways in which they are mutually inter-connected in reality (or, better: the many ways in which reality consists of inter-connection of ideas).

individual essence) – are now all played by just one entity (= the idea) according to the various syntheses into which it enters.

If ideas are either pure (and without connection) or (connected but) already concretely realized, how can we understand the difference between eidetic sciences and sciences concerned with matters of fact?

3.2 "... Even the 'science of reality' is properly only a science of the ideal"

Beck is adamant: "Wherever there are syntheses of essences, laws of essence rule"⁸⁹ One could be tempted to express essential laws by means of hypothetical judgments of the form "*If* the essences X and Y exist in a given realization-connection, *then* they *must* relate to one another, by virtue of their intrinsic nature, in such and such a manner".⁹⁰ This can be done, but only on condition that the use of the hypothetical form is not meant to deny the existence of ideas prior to their realization in a concrete connection: "The necessities of essence, that is to say, the intuitively necessary relations between essences presuppose the existence of fixed relation-members (the essences themselves). Were there no self-identical ideas or essences prior to all relations between themselves, then laws of essence would be impossible".⁹¹

However, the use of the hypothetical form makes perfect sense insofar as one's ambition is to express the fact that *laws of essence* obtain only where there are syntheses of essence (as one could also affirm, reversing the quotation with which I opened this section). This could suggest or imply that eidetic sciences (to Husserl's famous expression) investigate concrete real things (just like sciences of matters of fact), yet from the angle of the ideas making them up. If this were the case, the two types of science would have the same subject (concrete reality); but they would look at it from two different perspectives: as a fact, and as the realization of a system of ideas. However, this is not at all Beck's position. *He does not accept the very distinction between two species of sciences*. Or in an even more puzzling way, for Beck, there are no such things as empirical sciences or sciences of matters of fact. *All sciences are eidetic sciences or sciences of (concrete) ideas*. Here I cannot delve into the many arguments that Beck mobilizes to support his claim (in

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 217. In "Science and Universals", Beck refers to Aquinas, *De ente et essentia* (I, 370): *Nomen [...] naturae [...] videtur significari essentia rei secundum quod habet ordinem ad propriam operationem rei*. He comments: "In medieval terminology, this term [nature] was used equivalently with *essentia* or *forma*, that is, with the pure quiddity of things, abstracted from their facticity; it is equivalent to *idea*" (Beck: "Science and Universals", *op. cit.*, p. 17).

⁹¹ See Beck: "Ideelle Existenz", *op. cit.*, p. 217.

relation to natural sciences and the *Geisteswissenschaften*); what I will do instead is simply present the (seemingly scandalous) thesis he defends in the final section of “*Ideelle Existenz*”. Let me quote a few excerpts.

We ask: Is there a necessity of factual being and real being? Do the sciences seek for the grounds of the being-real and of the matters of fact themselves? Never, although they often misunderstand themselves in this sense. [...] They always and only ask the question about the why of a being-thus, of a being-what – *but never the question about the why of the fact [Daß-seins that]* of a what or how. [...] They seek to clarify a what or essence through an another what or essence; they seek the necessary relations between them.

Then even the “science of reality” is properly only a science of the ideal. Its goal must be that of obtaining knowledge that is as intuitive as that of mathematics and logic.

“Does this mean that everything that nowadays counts as knowledge of nature is no science at all?” [...] My view is comparable to that of a philosopher who would have said in those times when the *mysticism* of figures and numbers was considered *knowledge*: “What you are passing off as knowledge is no knowledge”.

We firmly establish that real sciences and sciences of matters of fact do not intend to know reality and matters of fact, but rather only their being-thus, what, and essence.⁹²

Beck is clear. The idea that there are empirical sciences or sciences concerned with matters of fact is the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of scientific knowledge itself.⁹³ It should now be evident why in a passage quoted earlier Beck could write, “*de jure* there is no difference between the necessity with which a triangle consists of angles and sides, and the necessity that a certain animal body consists of flesh, blood, bones, etc.”⁹⁴ In turn, this presupposes that everything that is, is made up of ideas, or better, that everything that is consists of (abstract) ideas concretely connected together:

Every what, every how, every determination, every distinguishable quality of this world, the one we live in, and of all possible worlds, all what and being-thus outside of us as well as inside us are “ideas”. We could not open our eyes, we could not hear, smell,

⁹² Beck: “*Ideelle Existenz*”, *op. cit.*, pp. 228–229, 230, 237.

⁹³ In “*Science and Universals*”, Beck invests a great amount of energy and time in striving to clarify the many different reasons that lie at the basis of science’s own self-misinterpretation. In *Wesen und Wert II*, *op. cit.*, pp. 603–619, he presents a long critical discussion of the concept of “force” proper to modern science.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

taste, touch anything without perceiving ideas; we could not represent nor imagine of anything without having “ideas” and “essences” before our spiritual gaze. [...] Likewise, bodies and living beings, egos and the conscious spirit are determinations, “essences”, “ideas”.⁹⁵

Beck’s position could be labeled *pan-essentialism* or *pan-idealism*. By such turns of phrase, I do not only mean to express the fact that ideas are everywhere (there is an idea of every “shade of red”⁹⁶); I also mean to express the claim that everything consists of ideas. And the fact that everything consists of abstract ideas concretely interconnected (governed by laws of essence) is what makes it possible for everything to be intelligible, rational, and rationally knowable⁹⁷: “The self-evidence of reason is a self-evidence of understanding why under the same circumstances a certain thing necessarily behaves toward another thing in the same way. The reason for this necessity, however, is seen in the *what* and *how* of things”. As he also concludes, “The *what* and *how* as such are what so-called Platonism means when speaking about ideas”⁹⁸.

Once again, Beck’s position could be understood against the backdrop of early phenomenology. For example, it can be regarded as a radicalization of Husserl’s position. In Husserl, the difference (systematically presented at the beginning of *Ideas I*) between eidetic sciences and sciences of matters of fact is crucial in that the former are meant to provide the “rational” framework within which the latter can operate. In §9 of *Ideas I*, Husserl speaks of the eidetic sciences’ “function of rationalizing the empirical”.⁹⁹ In this respect, Beck does indeed radicalize Husserl’s view by paradoxically dropping the distinction between what is in need of rationalization (the empirical as what is investigated by the *Tatsachenwissenschaften*) and what plays the *function of rationalizing* (the eidetic sciences), thus the opposition between two kinds of sciences. What is, is rational through and through because

⁹⁵ Beck: “Ideelle Existenz”, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁹⁷ The only irrationality is that there “factually” (*Dasein*) are such and such concrete connections of ideas in the world. This is also the reason why he describes the “hierarchy of essences” as *das letzte Faktum*: “Es ist das schlechthin Uneinsichtige, das einzige Irrationelle der Welt” (Beck: *Wesen und Wert II*, *op. cit.*, p. 595). This cannot be the object of any rational knowledge, for the question about the sense of *Dasein* (the fact of the world) is metaphysical. As Beck writes in a letter to Conrad-Martius, “Nach dem Sinn des Dass-seins und nicht des Was-seins fragt Metaphysik” (Beck, Maximilian: “Brief an H. Conrad-Martius (19. 5. 1932)”, *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek*, Ana 354, C I, p. 1).

⁹⁸ Beck, Maximilian: “The Last Phase of Husserl’s Phenomenology: An Exposition and a Criticism”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1, 4 (1941), pp. 479–491, here p. 491.

⁹⁹ Husserl: *Ideen I*, *op. cit.*, p. 25; English trans., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

it is nothing other than a synthesis of ideas governed by the only existing laws, the laws of essence.

* * *

Is it possible to speak of *realism* here? If Conrad-Martius denounces the risk of *Ideenrealismus* implied by Hering's account of essentialities, how should one characterize Beck's own position regarding the *ideal* nature of reality (*ideal* because it consists only of *interconnected ideas*)? Conrad-Martius's *Ideenrealismus* amounts to the thesis that ideas have reality, a reality that is ontologically "superior" to that of individual objects. But what sort of realism do we endorse if we contend that (concrete) reality consists exclusively of (abstract) objective ideas concretely interconnected?

4. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to present some of the main features of Maximilian Beck's doctrine of ideas by putting it back into the context of the early phenomenological discussions about ideas and essences. Thus given the very limited scope of this paper, I had to leave many aspects of Beck's *Ideenlehre* out of the discussion. For instance, I could not address his arguments to the effect that both *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften* are, despite their methodological differences, sciences of ideas. By the same token, I could not delve into his critical treatment of modern sciences and their self-misunderstanding as "sciences of matters of fact". Most importantly, in this paper I could not consider Beck's "peculiar" reading of the Platonic (and Aristotelian) problem of $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\theta\epsilon\xi\varsigma$ or participation, which is based on what he regards as the "a-numerical" nature of ideas.¹⁰⁰ Here I say "peculiar" because Beck's interpretation boils down to denying that the theory of participation should be taken at face value and thus understood in terms of something (a particular) *participating* in something else (a universal idea). If to be *concrete* means to be a synthesis of ideas or essences according to a certain hierarchy, then the talk of *participating in* ... loses all its sense: there is nothing prior to the synthesis itself that would participate in an idea or a group thereof.

The main tenet this paper has wanted to present is the one about the "abstract-simple" nature of ideas (which I called the *simplicity thesis*), and all the consequences that Beck is able to draw from such a thesis regarding the (concrete)

¹⁰⁰ See Beck: "Ideeelle Existenz", *op. cit.*, pp. 218–221.

structure of reality (I am referring to the crucial concepts of *synthesis of essences* and *hierarchy of essences*, as well as to the thesis that *substance* is only a function of the whole; the nature of eidetic laws; and last but not least, the nature of scientific knowledge).

One aspect, however, remains to be discussed, an aspect that Beck himself does not seem to have taken into account: I am referring to the methodological problem of how, given the concrete structure of reality, we can obtain abstract-simple ideas. Beck himself mentions the Husserlian act of ideation, yet without getting into any discussion of it. But the *ontological discourse* about the nature of ideas cannot dispense with the *gnoseological meta-reflection about its own possibility*: only if we clarify this problem can we also understand how it is possible (*a contrario sensu*) for ideas to enter into many concrete connections while remaining identical with themselves (the individuation problem). A new essay is thus required in which these problems will have to be dealt with more carefully.

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