

Imagination and Phenomenological Method

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Fiction constitutes the vital element of phenomenology as of all eidetic sciences.

Husserl

There has been a close link between imagination and method in Western philosophy and science, both of which not infrequently appeal to imagination in an effort to explain the genesis of ingenious hypotheses, bold thought-experiments, brilliant inferences, and the like. But the appeal typically occurs as a move of last resort: "imagination" more often names a mystery than a truly explanatory mental process. Phenomenology has been no exception in this regard, since it too appeals to imagination in its methodology. Yet the exact role of imagining within phenomenological method has been for the most part neglected by phenomenologists.¹

Accordingly, my task will be to investigate in some detail the relationship between phenomenological method and imagination. This will be done by discussing a group of three closely related paradoxes. The first paradox is rooted in the way Western philosophy has traditionally conceived the relationship between imagination and the philosophical enterprise. As we shall see in section I, phenomenology is in this regard illustrative of a pervasive trend which at once devaluates and draws upon imagination. But, as will be shown in section II, a second and even more crucial paradox is

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the fact that phenomenological method must make use of imagination in order to describe the nature of imagination itself. In section III a final paradox will be analyzed—a paradox which stems from the way in which imagining combines the freely variable with the strictly invariant.

Exploring all three paradoxes will enable us to take a close look at phenomenological method as such and, at the same time, glimpse the outlines of an adequate phenomenology of imagination.²

I

To study imagination in a philosophical context is to land immediately in the first of the paradoxes mentioned above, which can be expressed in the following way. On one hand, philosophers have adopted an official attitude toward imagination which ranges from Platonic contempt to contemporary indifference. There is a remarkably widespread tendency to denigrate imagination, to condemn it as cognitively dangerous: "the mistress of falsehood and error," said Pascal, or to belittle it as wholly inconsequential: philosophical thinking, proclaims Heidegger, is "charmless and image-poor."³

In a climate of continual and continuing disparagement, any latent sympathy for imagination expresses itself in an effort to give imagining an exaggerated role in some enterprise *other than* philosophy,

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as an example, in artistic creation or in scientific discovery. Only rarely has it been suggested that imagination might have a central role to play within philosophy itself. With few exceptions, the Western tradition in philosophy has been so overwhelmingly logocentric in orientation that imagination has not been considered of critical significance in gaining philosophical insight.⁴ Indeed, it has often been considered as obscuring or preventing such insight.

On the other hand, in its actual practice, namely, its working method, the very same tradition has been inextricably bound to the *use* of imagination. This use is more extensive than is generally admitted. It occurs, above all, in the preliminary procedures which philosophers have employed in the pursuit of their cherished logocentric aims. The result is a paradoxical pattern of denial-*cum*-acknowledgment in which an express denigration is accompanied by a covert recognition of the considerable value of imagination in the very process of philosophizing. This pattern may be observed in the ambivalence with which a number of Western philosophers, including Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, view imagination. All of these thinkers were acutely aware of the importance of method in philosophy, and all accorded imagination a privileged position in methodology—a position which has no sanction or support in other parts of their philosophy.⁵

We shall center our attention upon the particularly pertinent case of Husserl, who follows in the footsteps of the philosophers just cited. But before we come to Husserl let us look briefly at the position of Descartes, who is the first modern philosopher to exemplify the paradox of denial-*cum*-acknowledgment. In his *Meditations* Descartes describes his method as one in which he has “put aside every belief in which I could *imagine* the least doubt.”⁶ Further, he sets out to “pretend” or “suppose”—two mental acts which are closely allied, though not identical, with imagining—that all of his former beliefs are “entirely

imaginary and false” and that he is being deceived by an omnipotent evil genius.⁷

Now to perform such sweeping acts of doubt requires not only a suspension of ordinary beliefs but a forceful use of imagination. The fact that such doubt is solely methodological in character only underlines the essentiality of imagination’s role. For it is not through having discovered new evidence or logical reasons for doubt but by an act of imagination that Descartes effects the methodological suspension of belief: he tries to imagine that the world is the kind of place in which the normally unquestioned validity of everyday beliefs does not obtain. Yet there is scarcely any basis for such a crucial recourse to imagination in Descartes’ theory of mind, in which imagination is regarded as adventitious and eliminable. Thus, later in the *Meditations*, he condemns imagining as “in no way necessary to my nature or essence, that is to say, to the essence of my mind.”⁸ Hence imagination, which earlier in the same work had been invoked as fundamental to certain initial methodological moves, is declared inessential to the mind, even though Descartes meanwhile has been driven to draw upon specific imaginative capacities. In this rapid turnabout we observe a striking instance of at once acknowledging and denying human powers of imagining: what is granted with one hand is taken back by the other.

Husserl presents an even more paradigmatic form of the denial-*cum*-acknowledgment paradox. Himself a professed admirer of Descartes, his work exhibits to an acute degree a similarly deep-seated ambivalence toward imagination—an ambivalence which involves both recognition of its critical importance in philosophical method and disparagement of its epistemological value. This disparagement is expressed, first of all, by a conspicuous neglect: only rarely do we find a detailed description of imagining in Husserl’s published writings. Even the often-cited Dresden gallery example in *Ideas* involves a mixture of imagining, remembering, and signifying.⁹ When imagination is singled out, as

in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, it is given a decidedly secondary role. Its basic operation is conceived as that of "presentification" (*Vergegenwärtigung*), which is only a modification of a directly giving, presentative consciousness such as is found in perception.¹⁰ In fact, insofar as perception is considered the "basic" or "simple" act (to use the terms of the *Logical Investigations*), Husserl endorses the primacy of perception: a primacy in terms of which imagination is necessarily secondary in status.¹¹

Furthermore, Husserl's professed aims in philosophy are such that imagination appears to be excluded *ab initio* from the pursuit of objective knowledge. To the extent that phenomenology is a "rigorous science," it aims at describing

a universal conformity to laws of structure on the part of conscious life, a regularity by virtue of which alone truth and actuality have, and are able to have, sense for us.¹²

Such conformity and regularity leave little room for imagination's arbitrary adventures. If objective, conceptualizable truth is found in the nonvarying content of experience, imagination cannot, by its own action, embody such truth. For imagination signifies the variable *per se* (a theme to which we shall return in section III). Its divagations, when unchecked, distract and divert us from what is "absolutely invariable."¹³ To use Husserl's metaphor, the imprint or seal of conceptual truth must be placed *upon* all lower cognitive strata, including the strata of expression and imagination.¹⁴ In this manner, the logically apodictic is ranked above the actual or the possible, the conceptually necessary above the empirically contingent. Logos, god of reason, triumphs—at least in theory—over Eros, god of imaginative desire.

I say "at least in theory" for a closer look at Husserl's writings reveals a very different aspect of his attitude toward imagination. Despite his doctrinal commitment to a resolute rationalism, Husserl takes a surprisingly open stance toward the act of imagining. For in his actual

practice of philosophy—namely, in the use of phenomenological method—imagination, although still distrusted in the realm of reason, comes into its own. Since phenomenological method, especially as formulated and constantly reformulated by Husserl, is exceedingly complex, we shall limit ourselves to the claim that a case can be made (and will be made more fully in section II) that this method is significantly parallel to the spontaneous operation of imagination while also involving the exercise of imagining in its own operation. In both respects, the role of imagination is considerably enhanced and enlarged, compared with its strictly secondary status in Husserl's theory of mental activity. For its primary product, fiction, taken in the broadest sense, is shown to be essential to the successful prosecution of phenomenological method, and imagination is thereby elevated to a position of the first rank. Perhaps more than any other post-Romantic philosopher, Husserl accords imagination a place of prominence in philosophical methodology. In this methodology, imagination is responsible for securing "all essential necessities and essential laws—all genuine intuitive *a priori*."¹⁵

It is therefore perplexing that Husserl, while granting imagination full play within phenomenological method, is not willing to recognize it as an independent act in its own right. What is essential to the gaining of eidetic insight becomes a mere mode of presentification in the context of epistemology. There could be no starker contrast than that between the role of imagination in phenomenological method and its subordinate role in Husserl's model of the mind. In the latter it is restricted to modifying memory, from which it is thereby held to be derivative. It makes little difference that this is "memory in the largest sense" or that imagination is said to be indefinitely reiterable.¹⁶ These concessions to the scope of imagination are minor when compared to the compass the same mental operation is given for the sake of pursuing eidetic insight. The con-

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trast remains, reminding us that, for all his obstinate originality, Husserl does not overcome the schizophrenic attitude with which other Western philosophers have also viewed imagination.

Nonetheless, unlike these other philosophers, Husserl at least intimates a way of breaking out of the paradoxical pattern of denial-cum-acknowledgment, and for this reason he merits further consideration. For closer scrutiny will suggest a possible exit from the stalemate in which Husserl's predecessors—typified by Aristotle and Descartes, Hume and Kant—were caught. All of these latter figures are trapped in the initial paradox of asserting and denying, at one and the same time, the importance of imagining. By contrast, though Husserl does not entirely escape this paradox, he indicates a means by which it might be avoided: *phenomenological method itself*. For it is precisely by making use of imagination that phenomenological method allows us to view imagining unambivalently and in its full significance.

Yet this very realization brings us abruptly to a second paradox: it is advisable to *use* imagination in order to give an adequate descriptive account of imagination. But in contradistinction to the previous paradox, this second paradox is positive and promising. Where the first paradox is dominated by a desire to suppress the significance of imagination, the second displays an interest in imagination for its own sake. And where interest in imagining is at best indirect and surreptitious in the classical philosophers in the Western tradition, in Husserl's instance imagination is explicitly taken as a theme of philosophical interest. Yet it receives this attention not because of its importance in mental activity in general but because of its special role in phenomenological method. Hence Husserl grants imagination a status of its own—but only within the specific philosophical method he advocated.

II

As a consequence of the second

paradox, any attempt at a phenomenology of imagination finds itself in a peculiar position. Since imagining is a basic phenomenological technique, the phenomenologist will utilize the very capacity he aims to elucidate. Does this paradoxical circularity subvert the possibility of carrying out a phenomenology of imagination? Not insofar as imagination is a mental act like any other and thus a perfectly legitimate object of phenomenological description. To the extent that it is merely one mental act among others, it is as amenable as the others to the basic investigative procedures of phenomenological method. In this respect, imagination has no special position of advantage—or disadvantage. For, in principle at least, there are no privileged entities in phenomenology; every object, act, or event counts equally as what Husserl calls a "pure phenomenon."¹⁷

Nevertheless, imagination is not a mental act *just* like any other. In particular, it possesses an extraordinary elusiveness which is not found in other acts. This elusiveness (which accounts for our tendency to describe most imaginative experience as "fleeting") makes imagining not only difficult to pin down but unlikely as a source of philosophical insight: on both counts, imagination poses special problems. Yet, however difficult these problems may prove to be, they do not justify dispensing altogether with imagination as an aid in phenomenological description. In spite of its evanescent and often obfuscated character, it may still be a valuable tool for analysis—and precisely for its *own* analysis. Indeed, explicit awareness of its role in phenomenological method will help to make its own description more accurate. Accordingly, we turn now to a consideration of two principal procedures of phenomenological method, with both of which imagination is closely allied.

A. *Phenomenological Reduction*. What is the nature of this fundamental, and yet highly controversial, phenomenological technique? At the

very least, it involves (in Husserl's well-known terms) the "bracketing" of the "natural attitude"—that is, suspending the naively held belief that mundane objects exist in themselves in such a way as to be strictly transcendent to our consciousness of them. By a simple but radical change of outlook, we disengage the natural attitude's stranglehold upon almost all aspects of lived experience. This attitudinal change, which is not meant to be permanent, is effected by an abstention from—an *epochē* of—our untutored tendency to posit objects, events, or mental acts as transcendent presences or (more generally) as real (where "real" means to be grounded in transphenomenal factors). To escape the hold of the transphenomenal—that is, of factors which are conceivable exclusively in causal or substantial terms—we must cease, at least temporarily, to posit things as transcending consciousness. We put out of play our natural and naive belief in the independent existence of objects of consciousness, and this allows us to realize that the *meaning (Sinn)* of these objects can be made evident without reference to their *being (Sein)*.

There are, in fact, two aspects or phases of the phenomenological reduction: the reduction proper ("reduction of" the natural attitude), which is excluding in character, and the attainment of the sphere of immanence ("reduction to" this sphere). The sphere of immanence is the region of reduced phenomena, that is, of phenomena in a state of transparency to consciousness: a state characterized by "self-evidence" (*Evidenz*) and "self-giveness" (*Selbstgegebenheit*).¹⁸ Consequently, the function of phenomenological reduction as a whole is, in Herbert Spiegelberg's words, "to free the phenomena from all transphenomenal elements, notably from all beliefs in transphenomenal existence, thus leaving us with what is indubitably or 'absolutely' given."¹⁹ In short, phenomenological reduction leaves us with pure phenomena which make no claim to a transcendent status.

It is phenomenological reduction prop-

er, and not the subsequent disclosure of the sphere of immanence, that is of greatest moment for our present purposes. For this initial and basic stage of reduction displays several features which are remarkably parallel to certain traits of imagining. In both reduction proper and in imagining, belief in transphenomenal entities is suspended: we abstain from believing in them as abidingly real. This de-commissioning of doxic commitment is so extensive as also to exclude any supposition as to the *non-existence* of presented phenomena. Husserl distinguishes a Cartesian positing of *non-existence*—namely, active denial of ontic status as in Descartes' first *Meditation*—from his own attitude of sheer suspension. For any act of positing, even one which posits non-existence, is effected on the basis of a world in which belief continues to be placed, however implicitly.²⁰ Similarly, we do not posit the strict non-existence of phenomena in imagining, and this is so even when what we imagine (e.g., a unicorn) does not in fact exist. Rather, we simply contemplate imagined objects or events as possible: existent or not, an imagined unicorn is a purely possible beast.²¹ Finally, as a result of suspending doxic commitment there is a fundamental similarity of stance in reduction proper and in imagining. In both, we forgo active involvement in what immediately surrounds us. Thus what Husserl says of reduction proper could just as well be said of imagining: "all [our] natural interests are put out of play."²²

Husserl pointed to what he called the "close kinship" between imagination and phenomenological reduction.²³ But he was also keenly aware of differences between the two activities: he denies, for instance, that reduction is an operation of "merely imagining something in thought" (*sich bloss denkens*) or of sheer supposing (*annahmen*).²⁴ Moreover, imagining is regarded as significantly similar to "neutrality-modification," since the ontic status of imagined content (unlike perceived or remembered content) is neutral in character and since imagination is conceived as a modification of mem-

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... the world, exactly as it was for me earlier [i.e., before the reduction] and still is, as my world, our world, humanity's world, having validity in its various subjective ways, has not disappeared.²⁶

In imagining, contrariwise, the world as perceived or remembered *does* disappear; it forms no part of imagined content, which is confined to strictly imaginal presences.²⁷ It is at this point, then, that the parallelism between imagination and reduction reaches its limit.

We may conclude this brief comparison between phenomenological reduction and imagination by suggesting that an adequate account of imagining as such would eliminate at least one of the above-mentioned differences between the two activities. On the basis of such an account, which Husserl fails to provide, imagination would no longer be viewed as akin to neutrality-modification—or to *any* sort of modification of other mental acts. Thus imagining would be seen to possess an essential independence of its immediate context—an independence which is reminiscent of reduction proper. For context-independence is involved both in abstaining from committed belief in transcendent objects and in positing imagined objects as purely possible. Further, such independence makes possible the evidential certitude of both experiences.²⁸

But the parallel stops here, and any further analysis would have to acknowledge the differences that remain between the two activities, including the fact that imagining is subject to reduction in a way that differs inherently from the manner in which reduction can become the subject of an imaginative experience: I can im-

agine how it is to reduce without actually performing a reduction, but to reduce imagination I must apply the reduction to an actual act of imagining.

B. Free Variation in Imagination. If the relation between imagination and phenomenological reduction is one of limited parallelism at best, this is no longer the case with what Husserl calls "free variation in imagination."²⁹ In this latter procedure, imagination becomes an intrinsic part of the methodology. This occurs in two ways. First, as the source of what Husserl terms "fiction" (i.e., any product of imagining which exceeds the factual), imagination supplies the phenomenologist with a considerable portion of the examples which are the starting points of free variation proper. For the phenomenologist may begin his investigation with an example which is either factual or fictitious. If he is unable to find an example of a given phenomenon within present or past experience, he is perfectly free to invent an example as a point of departure in an eidetic analysis. Second, and more important, the factual or fictive example is then subjected to a systematic variation in imagination. It is this critical move which may be considered free variation proper, and in it imagination is, in Paul Ricoeur's words, "the main weapon in the tactic of the example."³⁰ For it is by employment of imagination that an example is freely and yet methodically varied until the essential structure of the phenomenon which is displayed in the example is made apparent. The full procedure of free variation proper (hereafter referred to simply as "free variation") consists in one or more of three complementary methodological moves:

(1) The attempted *removal* of all significant traits from the phenomenon in the example—that is, the effort to imagine such traits as absent from the phenomenon. This is the most direct and decisive mode of free variation. For those traits that *cannot* be removed in this way are, by virtue of their undissociability, shown to be essential to the phenomenon.

Together they form its *eidos*, the resistant core which is its invariant structural nucleus.

(2) The *substitution* of new traits for the original ones. Here one imagines different traits in place of those that are initially given as characterizing the phenomenon; instead of simply removing the original traits, the phenomenologist attempts to see if they can be replaced by *other* traits. If he fails in this effort, he is given assurance that the original traits are indeed essential to the structure and identity of the phenomenon in question. If he succeeds, this is taken as an indication that the traits are only contingent.

(3) The *productive imagination* of additional traits which are not given in the initial grasping of the example and which do not merely replace those that are. These extra traits act to fill out an example that is incomplete or ambiguous as first presented. But their imaginability is not, as such, a definitive indication of their essentiality; it is only an aid in determining the essential character of the phenomenon illustrated in the example.³¹

Now it cannot be denied that it is perception and not imagination which plays a privileged role in phenomenological method by serving as a model for direct givenness: "the intuition of essences is an originary giving act and is in this respect the analogue of sensible perception and not of fiction."³² But perception is analogous only to the final grasping of an essence, that is, to what Husserl calls "eidetic insight" (*Wesensschau*). It is neither analogous to, nor is it necessarily utilized in, the preparation for this ultimate insight. As we have just seen, it is imagination which is most crucial in the preparatory stages. More than either perception or memory, imagination allows for the unrestricted invention and exfoliation of examples—and for the detailed development of aspects of examples—which form the basis for eidetic insight. What Husserl says of the geometer is equally true of the phenomenologist:

On the plane of imagination he has the incomparable freedom of being able to change arbi-

trarily the form of his fictive figures, to run through all of their possible configurations.³³

Of course, he does not have to run through every one of them *ad infinitum*. This would be an impracticable requirement, and all that counts in any event are the significant variations, id est, those that represent genuinely different versions of a given phenomenon.³⁴ To bring forth these variations by means of imagination becomes essential to the phenomenological enterprise: "freedom in the investigation of essences necessarily requires that one operate on the plane of imagination."³⁵

Imagination is also called for because of its ability to project manifold possibilities—possibilities which are "pure" by virtue of their independence of the realm of fact. Here we need only note that common to both the act of imagining as such and to free variation is precisely an ability to entertain such pure possibilities, whether by treating already existing objects or events as sheerly possible or by projecting altogether new possibilities. In the pursuance of phenomenological method, each variation is regarded strictly *as* a possibility, not to be compared with pre-existent realities but only with other possibilities: as merely one possibility among others. In this way the work of the phenomenological reduction is reinforced by severing all connection with the posited realities of the natural attitude. The phenomenologist comes, in short, to inhabit what Husserl terms a pure "world of imagination."³⁶ And it is precisely in such an unlikely locale that he is in the best position to grasp essences:

[it is] a world of absolutely pure possibilities, each of which can then serve as a central structure for possible pure variations in the mode of the arbitrary; and from each [such possibility] results an absolutely pure *eidos*.³⁷

Therefore, essences or essential structures are obtained not by foraging or surveying the real but by disengaging oneself from mundane realities (i.e., from the fixations of the natural attitude) and by

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concentrating upon pure possibilities. >What Husserl calls "eidetic reduction" or (less frequently) "ideating abstraction" refers to this general movement from fact to essence via free variation.³⁸ Along with phenomenological reduction, free variation allows the phenomenologist to obtain access to essences. But it is above all in free variation that imagination comes into prominence as a central feature of phenomenological method itself. For it is only here that the phenomenologist can "let imagination have free rein"³⁹ in the confident expectation that it will aid him in achieving eidetic insight—and yet without drawing him into a debilitating dalliance in the imaginary, a dalliance against which the mainstream of Western philosophy has so incessantly inveighed.

III

As a result of our discussion of phenomenological method, we are now in a position to observe the curious way in which Husserl leads us, through a strictly methodological concern with imagining, toward an insight into its essential structure—which he himself fails to achieve when he approaches imagination outside the context of method. This insight concerns imagination's essentially *variable* character. Now it is precisely in its variability that imagination has occasioned a deeply ambivalent attitude on the part of philosophers. On the one hand, as the merely variable—as the shifting and inconstant—it has been subjected to a continual critique in Western philosophy ever since Plato announced that "a theoretical inquiry no more employs images than does a factual investigation."⁴⁰ For what varies in form or substance is held to be incommensurate with strict standards of objective knowledge. Such standards admit of no exceptions and thus of no significant variations from the norms they embody. These standards themselves are regarded as necessarily invariant—indeed, as the invariant *par excellence*. Such invariability is held to be constitutive of the highest objects of reason, whether these be forms, categories,

or other a priori structures. Western logocentrism, to which Husserl firmly and sometimes fiercely adheres, dictates that anything that strays from the invariant is *ipso facto* suspect. Locked within this logocentrism, philosophers of a rationalist persuasion have regarded imagination in its inherent variability as a primary source of distraction from objective truth. Thus Descartes describes imagination as "a vagabond who likes to wander and is not yet able to stay within the strict bounds of truth"; and Kant laments that the image is "determined by no assignable rule."⁴¹ These two indictments of imagining are not unrelated to each other: to be intellectually vagrant is to be ruleless, unruly. Imagination is seen as tending always to overextend itself and to lose its bearings when it ventures beyond the secure confines of reason; its intrinsic errancy marks it as a basically aberrant mental act.

Yet, on the other hand, imagining's variability has also been viewed as offering a legitimate avenue to truth. Precisely as variable, imagination provides a prelude to insight into a priori structures. In this spirit, it is even admitted that what seems to be a diversion from truth may end by being the most revealing approach to it. In any case, it is just this distinctly different attitude toward the variability of imagining which Husserl adopts in promulgating the method of free variation in imagination. For the value of variability is presupposed in this method, and an appreciation of this value allows us to realize that there may be more than a single inroad into truth—namely, that truth can be attained not only by sheer ratiocination but also by a systematic variation of content and context. Thus by varying the forms of facts or fictions in his imagination, the phenomenologist may discover what is truly unvarying in a given series of variations, and thereby knowing the invariant structure, he knows the objective truth about the phenomenon he is investigating.

It is both curious and crucial to observe that where most phenomena yield an invariant—a rule, a law, a certain type of

objectivity—at the end of a series of free variations in imagination, *imagination itself*, taken as an object of phenomenological investigation, shows itself to be radically variable in character—so variable, in fact, that it seems to possess no invariant structure of its own. Or we might say that imagining is invariant precisely in its own radical variability of content and aspect. Such variability is constitutive of imagining itself and not merely of our mode of access to it. In this important respect, imagination as a phenomenon is to be distinguished from both essences and perceptual objects which may involve the variable as an avenue of approach but which are not themselves constituted by continually varying factors. In these latter two cases, the invariant is sought amid the variations. In the case of imagination, we have to do with variations within the invariant itself—that is, with the variable *as such*, with that which cannot fail to be varied at our merest whim and which presents itself in ever-varying appearances.

Thus a final paradox suggests itself: a distinctive invariant feature of imagination is its very variability. Free variation, then, is not only a special phenomenological technique but is, in itself, of the essence of imagining as a total phenomenon. Yet insight into the inherent variability of imagining—an insight upon which Husserlian methodology capitalizes—does not prevent the ascertainment of stable features alongside shifting ones. Even if imagination's variability is in fact a constant characteristic, this does not preclude other, non-varying factors. Indeed, any prolonged phenomenological description of imagination must be devoted to discerning precisely such stable features. But it should be kept in mind throughout any such description that these features, however unchanging in ultimate form and function, do not exclude the essential variability of imagination's modes of appearance and expression. In their noematic nucleus, such features are rigidly invariant; but, as appearing to the mind, they are always varying and variant.⁴²

In sum, we may say that in its freedom of enactment, in its projection of pure possibilities, and in the unanticipatable wealth of its products, imagining manifests itself as a mental act which is incurably variable.

Any full picture of imagination, then, must do justice to *both* of its dimensions: to its essentially variable appearance, content, and aspect as well as to a core of constant traits (which themselves appear in varied ways). And it is by recognizing this duality of dimensions that the force of the final paradox is diminished: variability is not the *only* invariant feature of imagination, even if it is the most conspicuous and general such feature. Moreover, the sense in which the variability of imagination is itself invariant is not only as an *eidōs* which is present as such to eidetic insight but also as an uneliminable aspect of the *experience* of imagining. In imagining, we experience the variable directly in terms of the unexpectedness of the onset of the act and in its ever-changing course and direction. Therefore, the very *way* we experience imagination is itself radically variable, and imagination's variability cannot be confined to such objective features as pure possibility or independence of perceptual parameters. Both the imaginer and the imagined are caught up in a dialectic of incessant transformation. But if this is so—if variability is built into imagining as act and as object—it cannot be claimed that the third paradox possesses the same significance as the two primary paradoxes explored in the previous sections.⁴³

IV

The foregoing reflections on phenomenological method and imagination may be brought to a close by stressing that an insight into the ceaselessly varying character of imagining is facilitated by the actual use of one of the principal procedures of this method. Free variation in imagination both exemplifies and illuminates this character. Husserl seized on the intrinsic variability of imagining as

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possessing supreme methodological value, despite the fact that imagination as a mental act occupies only a secondary position in his philosophy of mind. Such is the paradox of denial-*cum*-acknowledgment. But if we wish, as phenomenologists, to do justice to imagination—namely, to recognize its independent status as a mental act—we are led ineluctably to the second paradox: to describe imagination adequately, we must employ imagining as part of our procedure. As we have seen, this employment of imagination (as method) to describe imagination (as phenomenon) draws on imagination's intrinsic powers of variation; and we land in a third (and tamer) paradox when we realize that such variability is a constant characteristic of imagining, even in its everyday enactments. Thus we arrive, by a series of paradoxes arising from considerations of method, at a basic grasp of the nature of imagining itself *qua* variable. At the same time, we come to appreciate the fact that questions concerning phenomenological method on the one hand and the character of imagination on the other are not so distinct as they might at first appear to be. Indeed, we begin to suspect that they are closely intertwined. And the important implication is that, just as phenomenological method makes prominent use of imagination, a philosophical study of imagination cannot afford to ignore the question of a proper philosophical method.

I say "*a* proper" and not "*the* proper" method because it cannot rightly be claimed that phenomenology provides the only satisfactory method for achieving an adequate philosophical account of imagination. Wittgenstein is justified in asserting that "there is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies."⁴⁴ But we can at least claim, as this essay has attempted to show in part, that phenomenological method is unusually well situated to investigate imagination insofar as one of its basic techniques involves the direct and active use of imagining itself. In this respect, what is at

first sight paradoxically circular—*id est*, has to utilize imagining in the description of imagining—may end by being a specific strength. For phenomenological method is in an especially favorable position for giving a general account of imagination. Through its use of free variation and (to a lesser extent) its practice of phenomenological reduction, it is already intimately acquainted with the process of imagining and, above all, with its capacity for endless variety. A method that rigorously excluded a technique such as free variation would find itself at a disadvantage in treating imagination, which would appear as merely one mental act among others. Indeed, a militant stance of scientific objectivity which disdained recourse to imagination as an exploratory technique—as in many contemporary conceptions of methodology—would find itself approaching imagination as an alien and often highly suspicious mental activity.⁴⁵

However controversial the place of imagination may be in an enterprise which, like much modern science, highly values objectivity, its crucial role in art, in philosophy and in everyday human activities is more difficult to deny. This does not mean, however, that we are entitled to assume that the special role of imagination in art (e.g., as stressed by Romantic poets) or in philosophy (as emphasized by Husserl) provides a definitive model for imagining in all its avatars. Moreover, even if the use of imagination is more extensive in art or in philosophy than in other comparable human activities, this should not be allowed to prejudice the outcome of a general project of describing imagining in its eidetic structure. Such a project aims only at offering an accurate account of imagining in its minimal and yet seminal form—a form which, despite its many guises and possible extensions, can be viewed as a unified structure or series of structures.

Phenomenological method presents itself as an especially appropriate and promising basis for discovering and delineating this phenomenon's primary traits, among which variability figures

prominently. And this is so not because phenomenological method is of supreme value in the description of all phenomena but because, self-consciously employing imagination in its own methodology, it finds itself more familiar with and more sensitive to this particular phenomenon than alternative methods which abjure its role in philosophical method. Whatever

the paradoxes arising from the central place of imagining in phenomenological method, this method presents itself as a privileged means of elucidating imagination's *eidōs*. Consequently, if phenomenological method calls for the use of imagination, eidetic insight into imagination calls for the use of phenomenological method.

NOTES

1. For some recent efforts in this direction, however, see David Levin, "Induction and Husserl's Theory of Eidetic Variation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1968), 29: 1-15; Donald Kuspit, "Fiction and Phenomenology," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1968), 29: 16-33; Richard M. Zaner, "The Art of Free Phantasy in Rigorous Phenomenological Science," in F. Kersten and R. Zaner, eds., *Phenomenology: Continuation and Criticism* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1972), pp. 192-219; and Richard M. Zaner, "Examples and Possibles: A Criticism of Husserl's Theory of Free-Phantasy Variation," *Research in Phenomenology* (1973), 3: 29-43. In varying degrees, all of these essays are critical of Husserl's notion of the role of imagination in phenomenological method, and in this regard they complement the present essay.

2. This essay forms part of my book, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (forthcoming, Indiana University Press).

3. Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. L. Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, 1962), p. 54; Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), p. 229.

4. The term "logocentric" is borrowed from Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), pp. 21ff.

5. To glance at these three classical cases: (a) In Aristotle's model of the mind, sensing and thinking are elevated to positions of supreme epistemological value. Imagination, caught in the middle, is said to be "for the most part false" (*De Anima*, 428a 11). Yet in practically the same breath Aristotle adds that imagining is necessary to the soul, which "never thinks without an image" (*ibid.*, 431a 16). This rapid promotion of imagination to a position where it is necessary to thinking in general (and hence to philosophical thinking as well) occurs unexpectedly and yet with firm insistence.

(b) Similarly, Hume begins by asserting that nothing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination," and calls for "a resolution to reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding" (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby Bigge [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955], p. 26). Yet it turns out that the understanding itself is conceived by Hume as "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" (*ibid.* Cf. also p. 165: "the memory,

senses, and understanding are therefore, all of them founded on the imagination"). Thus Hume comes to acknowledge the essential ingrency of imagining in the very activity of understanding, which is in turn crucial to philosophical thought.

(c) Following the same pattern, Kant denounces the merely "visionary" imagination, which is said to produce "empty figments of the brain," yet contrasts it with an "inventive" imagination, which has the merit of operating "under the strict surveillance of reason" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith [New York: Humanities Press, 1950], p. 613). In the end, imagination is elevated to a position of central prominence within Kant's epistemology: "a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever" (*ibid.*, A 78 B 103). It is indispensable because it is the source of all intellectual synthesis in the understanding, and such synthesis is what "first gives rise to knowledge" (*ibid.*, A 77, B 103). Consequently, imagination is again made basic to understanding, id est, to the faculty of knowledge, and thus to philosophical activity itself.

6. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. L. J. Lafleur (New York and Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), p. 23. My italics.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

9. Husserl, *Ideas*, trans. B. Gibson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), sec. 100.

10. Cf. Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), appendices 1 and 2.

11. Cf. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), pp. 606-610, 642-47, 682-88, 760-63, and esp. 773-95.

12. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960), p. 59.

13. Husserl, *Phänomenologische Psychologie* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1962), p. 73.

14. Cf. Husserl, *Ideas*, sec. 124.

15. Husserl, *Phänomenologische Psychologie*, p. 72.

16. Cf. Husserl *Ideas*, sec. 111-12. To be more exact: imagination is a strictly *nonpositing* mode of presentification, in contrast with memory, which is conceived as positing (i.e., existence-establishing) presentification. Whereas imagination is a modifica-

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