

# SUBJECTIVE IDEALISM V PHENOMENALISM

## 1

Both include *immaterialism*. Both reject the notion of “things in themselves” that are beyond “experience” —not just actual but even possible “experience.” For many, this immaterialism is all that matters. All immaterialisms are lumped together into the category of “subjective idealism.”

## 2

This conflation is a mistake. For the subjective idealist Berkeley, *esse est percipi*. “To be is to be perceived.” For Berkeley, the subject is “substantial” in a way that its “ideas” are not.

Time therefore being nothing, abstracted from the Succession of Ideas in our Minds, it follows that the Duration of any finite Spirit must be estimated by the Number of Ideas or Actions succeeding each other in that same Spirit or Mind. Hence it is a plain consequence that the Soul always thinks: And in truth whoever shall go about to divide in his Thoughts, or abstract the Existence of a Spirit from its Cogitation, will, I believe, find it no easy Task.

This last claim is especially relevant. Phenomenalism completes just this task. This is because phenom-

enalism reinterprets “time”<sup>1</sup> as a *neutral* stream by grasping the “mind” as *one more entity in the world*, which is “transcendent” in Husserl’s special sense of the word.

### 3

In other words, the mind is an “empirical-linguistic ego”<sup>2</sup> which is “in” the phenomenal stream and not *identified* with this stream.

Phenomenalism’s “perspectival” but “non-subjective” stream is *not compatible* with the *esse est percipi* of subject idealism. The empirical-linguistic ego does not need to “be perceived” by some “higher-order” additional ego to exist.

Reality is “perspectival” but not “subjective.” The perspectival character of a phenomenal stream is typically misinterpreted in terms of a subject “having” or “experiencing” the stream. The “nondual” stream is misinterpreted as a “stream of consciousness.”

It’s this assumption that is expressed as “to be is to be perceived.” This assumption implies that reality needs a “witness.” But this witness, as something that exists — and therefore part of reality — must itself need a second-order witness, and so on. So this kind of “witness ontology” is incoherent.

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<sup>1</sup>the phenomenal stream that subjective idealists but not phenomenologists call “Mind” or “phenomenal consciousness”

<sup>2</sup>This linguistic ego is at the center of an ontological “ego” (actually just a streaming of the world) which is structured by that empirical ego’s beliefs.

Mach is often associated with Berkeley. But Mach is a *genuine* phenomenalist, while Berkeley, the subjective idealist, is merely a *proto*-phenomenalist. Thinkers like Mach and Mill saw the general immaterialist *intention* of Berkeley and extended it against the “Mind” that Berkeley thought it needed.

Phenomenalism evolves from and “fixes” subjective idealism. It achieves this by rejecting the fundamental principle of *esse est percipi* — while nevertheless continuing Berkeley’s demystification of the ultimately empty concept of “Matter.” Immaterialists point out that this philosophers’ “Matter” — which is not the matter of physics — is a decorative wheel that never touches the road.

For an enriched *aspect* phenomenism, the things of this world have their being *distributed* over various phenomenal streams. Such entities are also spread out over time. In other words, entities are the logical (interpersonal and temporal) syntheses of their actual or possible “moments.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The term “moment” is a generalization of the original metaphor “aspect.” As Husserl saw, spatial-visual entities are given in adumbrations or aspects, which are also spread out over time. A moment is an “aspect” that may be non-visual — perhaps a moment in a piece of music.

## 6

Phenomenal streams are roughly characterized as the combination of a located-perspectival “sensual” part and a “trans-perspectival” “logical” part that expresses the membership of the associated linguistic ego in a particular community’s inferential and semantic norms. This “space of reasons”<sup>4</sup> is an ontological horizon or forum.<sup>5</sup>

The “logical” part of the stream, associated with its central linguistic ego, enables communication. It enables entities to *be* interpersonal-temporal unities or logical syntheses of their “moments”.<sup>6</sup>

## 7

Phenomenalism embraces the immaterialist *intention* of subjective idealism but rejects its fundamental principle that “to be is to be perceived.” In other words, phenomenism rejects the assumption that reality needs a “witness” — that it is essentially subjective or “mental.” It nevertheless accounts for the perspectival character of reality that presumably motivated subjective idealism in the first place. Finally (and it is only hinted at here) it recognizes that the ontological forum is ontology’s necessary entity, an insight that makes its rival physicalism less plausible.

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<sup>4</sup>a concept from Sellars

<sup>5</sup>I focus on this horizon or forum elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup>See my other papers for details on this.