

PHENOMENALISM / ONTOLOGY / ABSURDISM

I hope you'll tolerate my use of the terms *ontology* and *phenomenalism*. I use *ontology* in the sense of "serious" or "scientific" philosophy, as opposed to "worldview" philosophy. In this I am influenced by Heidegger, but I am also influenced by the English empiricists. And that's where *phenomenalism* comes in, as the uncelebrated precursor and cornerstone of phenomenology.

To put it crudely, I see reality as "the sum of all experience." But such "experience", while given only as a plurality of streams, is no more subjective than objective. *A world through your eyes will arise.* The familiar lifeworld in all of its blazing plenitude is reality. Nothing is excluded. Only practical considerations drive the mundane distinction between the real and the unreal, the "physical" and the "mental."

My own view is very close to Sartre's, as expressed at the beginning of *Being and Nothingness*. But he is influenced by Husserl and Heidegger. And Husserl's view is from Berkeley, albeit a vast improvement on Berkeley. In the English tradition, we have Mill fixing Berkeley in his own way. Husserl is far more sophisticated than Mill, but the core achievement that determines phenomenology *as* ontology, is already in Mill, though Mill was not in a position to put it this way. Nevertheless, his understanding of matter as the *possibility* of sensation is basically there. Because the implication is that sensation is no longer mind-like, no longer subjective. Instead the things of the world

are given as aspects or moments in various personalized streamings of a single world. Schrödinger uses the phrase “aspects of the one.” Note that this is a double or iterated application of the aspect metaphor. Things are logical-temporal syntheses of their aspects. And the world itself is “shattered” in the same way, so that each “personal continuum” (“stream of consciousness”) is a “face” or “component” of the world which has no other kind of being. I don’t expect someone who hasn’t been or isn’t obsessed the issue to decode such a dense presentation of the idea. I have spelled it out more carefully in various informal essays, if you find it interesting.

The practical payload of this view is its recognition of the lifeworld in its fullness or totality. Promises are no less real than protons or polynomials. Daydreams are no less real than dandruff or deodorant. Common sense perhaps. But a few, like my younger self, are dazzled by physics into a vague belief that only atoms-and-void are real. I mean the contemporary equivalent of this seductive idea from Democritus. At least it’s seductive to an unwittingly still-theological personality type, almost always a male personality. It’s implicitly a deism, the kind that Housman espoused at 13 when he lost his mother to breast cancer. This existentialist aspect of atomism remains correct, in my view. The laughing philosopher, a proto-absurdist, an implicit existentialist, found a legitimate spiritual-attitudinal hill to die on.

But *ontologically* atomism is crude, a nakedly incomplete story. Why? Because *a forum is presupposed*. The ontological horizon, which is also the ontological

forum, must be presupposed by any reasonable ontology. Democritus presumably *meant* something by his atomism. He had to be understood in the realm of meaning. He had to (try to) *justify* his belief as more than an idiosyncratic daydream. In short, any scientific explication of reality has to allow for the possibility of scientific explication in the first place. The “forum” in which theories are justified can’t (without absurdity and confusion) be ruled out by this or that earnestly defended theory. Husserl says something like this in his prolegomena. In many more words. But Karl-Otto Apel wastes less time. Or at least this encyclopedic paraphrase does.

Apel’s strong thesis is that his transcendental semiotics yields a set of normative conditions and validity claims presupposed in any critical discussion or rational argumentation. Central among these is the presupposition that a participant in a genuine argument is at the same time a member of a counterfactual, ideal communication community that is in principle equally open to all speakers and that excludes all force except the force of the better argument. Any claim to intersubjectively valid knowledge (scientific or moral-practical) implicitly acknowledges this ideal communication community as a metainstitution of rational argumentation, to be its ultimate source of justification

One might also look into Popper’s essay on the tradition of rationality (of science) in *Conjectures and*

Refutations.

Now that I understand these things, after many years of wallowing like so many others in unrecognized contradictions, I can't help but see representationalist philosophy as a neurotically elaborated mistake. Des Cartes. Kant. And so much of a tradition that misunderstood the first-personal "delivery" of reality to imply that perception was representation, a kind of mental avatar for some kind of substance that was either physical or paradoxically ineffable. A philosopher who grasps that ontology's necessary object is ontology itself (the ontological forum of horizon) will see (I hope) that this understanding of perception as private representation *has* to be wrong. But the power of the new physics encouraged the delusion. It didn't much matter that the ontological theory associated with the new physics was trash, because this "merely" ontological theory didn't much get in the way. Until the arrival of relativity and quantum mechanics perhaps, where finally the problem became theoretically if not practically and technologically acute.

So what I sometimes call "neophenomenalism" is just an emphasis on the post-dualism of a phenomenology properly understood. Husserl obscured matters with his talk of "transcendental idealism." Though I know what he was aiming at. Which was not idealism at all in a certain sense but a nondual theory which emphasized the subjectlike character of substance –that fact that reality is *given* firstpersonally –in personal continua, in "first-person" perspectival streamings of the same world. Each worldstream is constituted by

aspects or moments of worldly entities embedded in an unrolling contexture. The “transcendental ego” or “pure witness” is a “nothingness.” Dasein is being-in-the-world is “time”. That’s implied already by the stream metaphor, and so the fact that “being is time” is implicit in the work of William James. Though of course it matters that Heidegger grasped and emphasized this identity of being and time. Time is the “nothingness” of every entity. Time is the “variable” entity, so that it is every entity and no entity.

Schopenhauer, following Kant, tried to make time “merely” subjective. He tried to put it “inside” the subject, as the *form* of representation. Of course space is another such form. Like Kant, he leaves true reality outside of and beyond both time and space. This is wrong. But, like most of the great mistakes in philosophy, it is based on and mixed with a valid insight. In this case, Schopenhauer misinterpreted the fact that knowledge *aspires* to be beyond time and space. Theory aspires to “cancel” time, to make the essence of the future and the past *present here and now* in the intellect of the theorist. So knowledge *intends* a timeless validity which is also independent of space. The glory of a theory of everything, presumably expressed in mathematical hieroglyphs, is that all of reality is captured, pinned like a flutterby, in the eternal wisdom of the Physicist-Sage.

The future is derealized, you might say. The far-seeing Magus knows the essence *now* of all that will be or might be. This is implicit in the project of sketching the form of all possible experience. Given the ontolog-

ical discovery that talk of reality beyond experience is round-square nonsense, the sketch of the constraining form of experience is a sketch of the fixed essence of reality itself. Surprise is radically mitigated. Our Magus is astonished at nothing, aloof on the peak of Eternity mountain, serene in his balcony seat, gazing at the human opera beneath him on the stage, watching the play of ephemeral forms, secure in his identification with the enduring deathless *form* of this riverworld's flux.

Great art similarly cancels time, or at least many artists try to make something of enduring relevance. That balcony-seat consciousness mentioned above can be expressed indirectly, like a rose in steel dust. The poet provides the details. The reader constructs the abstraction which is latent in or implied by the details.
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At this point I see the continuity between ontology and literature. The difference is one of style, of a direct versus an indirect presentation of the transcendent authorial consciousness. Phenomenalism's insight spares us from the popular delusion that poetry deals only with the representational crust of reality. Instead we grasp that reality is "all crust." That mood, for instance, is completely fused with "physical" reality. Physics, that fetish of the failed ontologist, is understood in its dependence on the largest context of the entire lifeworld. This is not only not an attack on the validity of a physics properly understood, it is instead a vivid awareness of how physics works. The

¹Jung's ambivalent essay on Joyce's *Ulysses* is worth reading on this.

“deworlding” that enables physics is a valuable and impressive technique. While a proper ontology avoids collapsing into a misunderstood physics, it shares with physics its aspiration for a time-conquering TOE. Of course such a successful ontology grasps the intrinsic metaphoricity not only of cognition but also (therefore) of the cognition-entangled world itself. With this metaphoricity or ever-reigning “analogic” (analogical logic) comes an ambiguity that is never finally eliminated, though it can be heroically reduced.

This reduction of ambiguity, which is the getting of a better and better but never perfect grip on our concepts, is explicitly the central task of the logical positivists. Like the phenomenologists, they are misunderstood and under-appreciated, through *some* fault of their own. The problem is yet again that a tired cartoon is substituted for an investigation of sources. To each age its lazy stupidity. For every serious ontologist, there are 99 tourists who play with bumper-sticker mantras and famous names, toys of the “educated” mob. This sounds venomous, but I really don’t blame the tourist, because ontology has the worldly foolishness of the pure math that nobody wants to pay you for.

Especially when we are young, we desire what others desire, primarily *because* they desire it. So works the magic of the famous name. I think Heidegger is actually great, worthy of his fame. But my motives for studying him in the first place weren’t any purer than those of others. An incentive structure driven by

vanity, which gets the job done, because some of us are sufficiently perversely invested in the elucidation of basic concepts to pierce beyond the tired mantras. We all start with paraphernalia, and a few of us develop the capacity for synthesis and paraphrase. Our reward ? Verily, we have our reward. In other words, it just feels good to get that strong grip on the total situation. It connects us to a fraternity of ghosts who came before, who could also see the world with one foot in the grave, which is to say from a balcony seat.