

INFREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is your “ontology” difficult to understand ? Yes. It must be. It was hard for me to find (I didn’t invent it), and it’s hard for me to share.

Why do you think that is ? Default taken-for-granted representationalism. An entrenched belief in “consciousness” and its “shadow.”

What are the weak spots ? Basically it’s hard to make sense of how exactly the world existed “before” phenomenal streams. Carbon dating suggests that there’s some old stuff in the world. In what way did it exist before us ? And I don’t only mean as finite mortal people. I mean “us” also in terms of “software.” I mean “us” in terms of “logic.” If I say that a certain meteorite was here before any form of life, what exactly am I saying ? The meteorite, for an aspect realist, is the logical synthesis of its moments. Which is why we can even *talk* about the meteor-before-us. But here we are *talking about it*. Presumably in terms of possible moments. As in: *if* we had a time-machine (which is probably not empirically possible), then we could see and touch that meteorite. We could recognize it.

Had anyone ever brought this up ? Yes. But it’s been a long time. I’d like someone to understand “my” ontology well enough to get around to this thorny issue. Even those that brought up very old objects were reacting to a vague version of phenomenalism. I’ve never felt certainly understood by anyone as far as *aspect* phenomenalism is concerned. Almost every-

one understands phenomenism as a weird idealism, where you just clip off Matter, somehow leaving Mind safe and secure. But this is the typical outsider conflation of phenomenism with subjective idealism. I wrote a paper on just this issue.

Can you elaborate on this idealistic misreading ? I can think of one guy in particular who loved to quote a passage of Schopenhauer that attacked materialism, by insisting that there is no object without a subject. But of course “my” phenomenism (and Wittgenstein’s and Sartre’s) does without this subject. Yes, there are empirical-normative-linguistic subjects. But “reality itself” not only doesn’t *need* a subject but doesn’t make sense with one.

Why not? Because then *that* presumably divine subject is part of reality. Another intentional-logical entity. Another object. Does that divine subject, as object, now need yet *another* super-divine subject to look on ? So reality is “before” the subject/object dichotomy. Which is Advaita Vedanta too. Though I don’t pretend to know much about that tradition. I can say that, once I understood nondual phenomenism, that various key passages/beliefs in that tradition made perfect sense to me. So I think that some philosophers in that tradition thought about existence basically the way that I do. Though of course I’m completely secular in my outlook. It’s all “dry conceptual analysis” to me. Yes, nondual phenomenism has a certain “logical beauty” for me. But it does not *at all* tempt me to “market” my understanding as

Spiritual Wisdom. Even to myself. It's more like I found an elegant proof in pure math. And I mostly *found* it indeed in old books, some of them relatively neglected. I did add some scissors and paste and a few of my own fine phrases.

What's the most difficult part of this theory that you mostly found in old books? It's related to the deflationary theory of truth. The redundancy theory. To say that P is true is basically only to reassert P. "Truth" is a secondary convenience for talking about belief. Belief, not truth, is fundamental. That's the first part. We only have beliefs. "True" is a way to talk about belief, to endorse or share in a belief. To reiterate a belief.

OK. Now what? Belief is the intelligible structure of world-from-perspective. I "live in" my beliefs. The world-for-me is always "significant" or meaningfully structured — Heidegger-type stuff. I can "read off" the structure of my world by expressing beliefs. "Your coat is in the closet." Now people who think that truth is a genuine or deep concept might say that the my assertion is "made true" by the coat being in the closet. But they presuppose (tacitly) that there's a Real or "aperspectival" world out there to which my claim may or may not conform.

What's wrong with that ? If the world is a plurality of streams, then the world exists *only* as world-from-perspective, each stream structured by the beliefs of the person at the center of that stream.

So it's not simply true or false that coat is really

in the closet ? Correct. Or rather “true” and “false” are misleading here. We have a very useful but confusing habit of talking about shared beliefs as if they weren’t beliefs. The stronger we believe, the more we live in that belief. We don’t even see it as malleable belief. We lose ourselves in the “blended perspective” of common sense, so that the perspectival character of reality is downplayed. But this is why phenomenological bracketing is best understood as the suspension of practicality. It depends on a foolish curiosity. And an intense focus on conceptual coherence that ignores the short-term offense to common sense and “what everybody knows.”

Is this not like Rashomon and As I Lay Dying ? That’s correct. The whole idea is there really. If you properly interpret the form of those works of art. The world is only “perspectives on the world.” Streaming world-for-Jack and streaming world-for-Jill. But, no small point, it’s *same* World that streams in both, just from a different perspectives.

So it’s streams of consciousness? As a first approximation, yes. But “consciousness” is misleading. We are talking about the world and its objects. Which are real. So it’s better to talk of “neutral” or “nondual” phenomenal streams. Streamings of *world* rather than consciousness.

What is an ontological ego? That’s another name for one of these streams. It’s not an ego really. It’s, like I said, a streaming of the world. On the other hand, this ontological ego is *structured by* the beliefs of the associated empirical-linguistic-normative ego —

the person at the center of the stream.

This is where the redundancy theory of truth fits in? Yes. Most people (I think) can't understand ontological perspectivism because they are attached to the concept of a truthmaker. In other words, they have a vague correspondence theory of truth. So for them a claim is "made true" by somehow conforming to "objective reality" — typically conceived as some kind of "Matter."

But you deny objective reality? Not exactly. An objective belief is unbiased belief. "Objective reality" is basically nonsense, though we know how to use this confused phrase practically. The scientific project involves moving toward the *ideal* (always on the horizon) of unbiased or objective belief. There's something ironic or disturbing in associating science with objective *truth*. Because truth seems to function as some kind of hardened belief. Dogmatic. Let mystics and political fanatics have their "truth." For science, the goal is warranted-rational-objective *belief*. Which we hopefully recognize as such, so that it remains flexible. We hope that our beliefs need less and less revision. But to call this an approximation of truth is meaningless. A decorate wheel that never touches pavement.

Is objective belief the structure of reality? No. The crazy person's "stream" is real. The world-for-crazy-Bob is as real as the stream of anyone else. In the wide sense of real. *All* "experience" is "real." Though of course we tend to use the word "real" in contrast to

merely “imaginary.”

So is objective belief the structure of the world-for-philosophers? Basically, yes. Or at least philosophers and scientists and rational people in general co-develop an imperfect and indefinite consensus. When I share “my” ontology (or whatever you want to call it), I am proposing it as a belief that might be adopted by such a consensus. Any “rational tradition” involves the history, criticism, and synthesis of beliefs. Such a tradition, by definition or in terms of its self-conception, is never done refining beliefs, creating new candidates for belief. Typically a creative person has an idea (often a synthesis of old ideas) and already pretty much believes it. So he or she is motivated to get this belief accepted. But dialogue can find faults. Or fail to find faults. Etc. Slowly the dominant consensus beliefs evolve, usually getting more complex. Hopefully more “adequate” and coherent.

What makes a belief good ? What is rational ? I could give you various opinions on that, but what really matters here is that such meta-beliefs are also up for debate. Only the rational ontological forum itself, in its essence, is beyond questioning.

Why is that? Nothing mystical. It’s just that the tradition collapses if its foundational ideology (that of science) is abandoned. Many candidate beliefs have unnoticed implications that challenge this founding ideology. Extreme forms of skepticism (which are actually “false” forms of epistemic humility based on

strong *positive* claims) often involve theories of knowledge or communication that tacitly rule out the possibility of their own rational discussion.

An example? People might express these examples in puffed-up terms. But I'll give you the essence. "Communication is impossible." Or "we all live in our own private world." Or "everyone has their own logic." To *argue* for such claims (or those that imply them) is a performative contradiction.

What about merely believing them? That seems possible to me. A person can be tormented with delusions, right? But let's say that someone is *not* tormented (somehow) with such a belief. Then we might expect them to not even *try* to argue for that belief. Because they are alone in a private world, or communication is impossible, or their listeners each have their own private logic.

What about quietism? I think it's mostly bogus, allowing of course for exceptions. Gellner's *Words and Things* does a great job of pointing out the hollowness of certain applications of the later work of Wittgenstein. Logical positivism is more honest, less pretentious maybe. Where are these philosophers who aren't *already* trying to clean up the confusion of philosophers who came before? But I *can* imagine a more respectable version of quietism. In this version, people think philosophy is futile and shut up. I can imagine a genuine spirituality that thinks debate is a distraction. If you think that Mystical Intuition is what's important, then it doesn't make sense

to *argue* that Mystical Intuition is important. For that implies that rational discussion is also needed. So that this “Mystical Intuition” starts to sound like grasping an idea. That’s my gripe about the “phony” version. It’s people who want to pretend they are beyond philosophy but can’t live without the conversation. And the whole “therapy” metaphor is also unpleasant. As if philosophy wasn’t a pleasure. Can we imagine quietest mathematicians, interrupting actual mathematicians to “cure” them of their fascination? The “therapy” metaphor looks to me like the envious resentment of those who can’t find the time or energy for serious thinking. So they adopt a cheap pose to try to shame those actually trying to achieve something positive.

How confident are you about your perspectival phenomenalism? Any rational tradition should keep trying to refine beliefs. So I’d be silly to expect that what I’m offering is the final word. And I myself can point out some rough edges in the theory. But I’ve been shaping it up for about a year, and I only feel more confident. It’s not that I expect it to catch on, though I would like that. It’s just that I can see that it basically works in the same way that I can understand a mathematical proof. I think it’s a coherent story. I should stress that it gets us back to Heidegger’s ontological difference. The “hard problem of consciousness” looks like confusion to me. This is because what people really mean by Consciousness in the interesting sense is *being*. “Ontological consciousness” is the being not only of “mental” entities but also of “physical” entities. But people mostly (incorrectly) take

physical beings to be unproblematic.

Why ? We usually agree about “facts” concerning coats and couches. That they are “there.” We don’t problematize this agreement. We don’t look at how meaning works. What it means to agree that a couch or coat is there. I wrote about this in detail in *Electric Meat*.

But mental entities are different ? No. But people, in a theoretical mode, act like they are. We tend to agree on which entities in the world “have consciousness.” Is this not the same kind of agreement that comes into play with couches ? We live in an “interpretedness.” In a typically unquestioned “obviousness.” This is why phenomenological bracketing is “anti-practical” or “foolish.” For those trying to pay the rent, it’s a distraction.

How do Popper’s basic objects come into this? They are a blind spot for scientism. And the whole vague fantasy of the third person aperspectival Reality. Popper saw that the foundation of empirical science was a swamp. Basic statements are “facts for now.” They are statements that we don’t currently doubt. An obvious example is an observation. Joe records the air-pressure. He reads a barometer and scribbles in his notebook. This is where the first person perspectival nature of the world can be swept under the rug. As long as we agree on basic statements, without asking too closely what they mean, we can get on with inferences. With ruling out hypotheses. So science can function almost as a free-floating system of logically related statements.

Empirical science needs experience, and basic statements are supposed to represent that ? Right. Experience. Which is “first-personal.” But once an experiential statement is just accepted, without anyone clarifying what experience or meaning is, a “structuralist” game can proceed. The place where the system of statements has “contact” with the world is occluded, repressed. Popper saw that protocol statements were problematic. Some of the logical positivists were phenomenologists. They were honest enough to try to solve this problem. Popper was clever enough to cut this knot without untying it. It allowed him to get on with the theory that *he* was interested in. And I like his theory. But in the end you have the usual practical *evasion* of the problem of being. Of the thereness of the world as a meaningful context.

So scientism is shallow. Ontologically shallow, yes, almost by definition. The more fascinating and elusive problem is hidden away. It’s even embarrassing. Wittgenstein is another story. He faced this issue, didn’t pretend that it *could* be addressed. And it really is an elusive thing. It is “nonsense” to “wonder at a tautology” — at the very existence of the world. There is nothing to be done with that wonder.

Are you motivated by a desire to share that wonder ? That’s not my primary motivation. But it’s part of the beauty of explicating the issue. You want to get rid of problems that are just confusion. The fake problems. When you get to what looks like bedrock, you’ve done all you can.

So you don't think the world or reality can be explained ? I don't think it can. Explanation relates entities to entities. But the being there of entities in the first place — the being there of the world as context itself — can't be explained. For that would require entities “within” the world to explain all of the world, and therefore those same entities. So of course I don't think God or any surrogate can *logically* explain being. Though obviously some “explanations” are comforting.

So you think Wittgenstein nailed it? Yes. Thought not just him. But I'm amazed that such a young person could untangle so much confusion. Obviously by distilling and synthesizing his influences. But he still deserves credit. I am sometimes annoyed (as I mentioned earlier) to see his work used in an anti-profound way. There are strains in Wittgenstein that make this perverse application plausible. Maybe it was exhausting to think at that intensity all the time. Maybe he was tired of being gripped and used by the Muse. But some people pick up these moments as an excuse to never exert themselves in the first place. Or rather they exert themselves against philosophy in the name of common sense. Anti-bracketing. And of course they don't want to talk about his phenomenalism. Or the perspectivism implied by the redundancy theory of truth.

Because it's awkward ? Phenomenalism is shocking. Whatever its logical virtues, it violates default common sense. Even though it explicates common sense. Because it sounds like (and indeed evolved

from) subjective idealism. So even though it explicates the world, it goes against the grain of a vague sci-fi dualism. Which you might call the theoretical common sense of those who live in a naive realist way but conceptualize the world philosophically in dualist terms. And of course it doesn't pay to think through some intricate counter-intuitive phenomenism. Easier to find an excuse. Not so different than avoiding learning anything about math. And this explains why good solutions can just sit on the shelf. Because what problem is being solved? Primarily it's the existential problem and not the logical coherence problem.

Yet you think phenomenism is the basis of phenomenology. Right. And I'm not completely alone on this. But I think that most people are still dualist in their understanding of phenomenology. They just think phenomenology is about "consciousness" rather than "physical reality." And this makes phenomenology an easier sell. And phenomenology is still interesting even in a dualist framework. After all, it was reading phenomenology that helped me understand phenomenism. The positions I criticize are usually my own former positions. I'm frustrated with my past self for not escaping various confusions sooner.