

ONTOLOGICAL PHENOMENALISM

The view that Blouin attributes to Husserl below is my own view. (And presumably Blouin's.)

Husserl, I will argue, did indeed hold that there is no reality “behind” or “beneath” the phenomenal stream (= ontological phenomenalism), yet this does not entail that all things exist “inside the mind” (be it of man, God, or transcendental subjectivity), as opposed to “out there” in the world. Rather, the phenomenal stream precedes the subject-object (or mind-world) dichotomy, and thus it is misleading to categorize it without qualification as subjective (or mental or immanent). It is precisely this inside-outside dichotomy that transcendental phenomenology attempts to undercut by positing the ontological primacy of the phenomenal stream. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10743-023-09328-6>

Husserl himself is, in my view, somewhat ambiguous on this point, though Blouin makes a good case for what I would call the strongest and therefore most charitable reading of of Husserl's work. In any case, what matters most is whether what Blouin calls “ontological phenomenalism” is the strongest ontological thesis we can manage. I think it is.

Later, Blouin handles the usual objection that phenomenalism necessar-

ily involves “data-sensualism,” and goes on to emphasize its gist.

Phenomenalism is thus not necessarily a sensualism, but it is necessarily an immaterialism in the Berkeleian sense, to the extent that it is defined principally by its opposition to the idea of an independent substrate lying “behind” or “beneath” the phenomenal. If Husserl explicitly rejects the first, sensualist thesis by Berkeley, nothing opposes him to the second, immaterialist one. Far from it, the post-transcendental-turn Husserl, as we have seen, explicitly denied the existence of a trans-phenomenal being, thus agreeing with Berkeley that the concept of a *Ding an sich* is pure nonsense (unless it is reinterpreted as an Idea in the Kantian sense).

Immaterialism is an ideal synonym for phenomenalism. Rather than being primarily a positive theory presenting sensation as the fundamental stuff of the world, it is a *negative* theory that rejects the nonsense of whatever is self-mystifyingly supposed to hide beyond all possible experience. Following Mill’s use, we might call it “Matter.”

This Matter names a role played by various conceptions of the represented “really real” according to the many flavors of representationalism (indirect realism, dualism). For some, Matter is what Sellars calls “the scientific image.” For others, it is, all too vaguely, “information” of

some kind. Still others, following Kant, leave it completely and necessarily indeterminate, an empty X. Schopenhauer, at times anyway, called it “Will.” All seem captured, without noticing it, by the same representational metaphor.

As Wittgenstein put it:

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

All assume that perception is **re**-presentation rather than *original* presentation. It’s worth noting that representation remains a valuable concept, as in the “picture theory” of the *TLP* and Husserl’s concept of the signitive intention. It just doesn’t work for perception.

An emphasis on the role and “real reality” of aspects is the cure for this misinterpretation of experience as fundamentally representation (as opposed to, to put crudely, “reality itself”). An entity is the logical and therefore temporal and interpersonal synthesis of its aspects, though we need to use “aspect” as a metaphor here. We need to *generalize* our aspect metaphor, so that “moment” becomes a more appropriate term of art. The aspect metaphor, however, remains valuable as an intuitively comfortable introduction to the more general concept of moment (as a ladder). For me it happened to be Husserl’s brilliant analysis of the

visual-spatial as or into a coherent, intentionally-logically unified set of adumbrations that helped me escape the representational metaphor. The first part of Mach's *The Analysis of Sensations* was also especially helpful.

If phenomenology is indeed best understood as having a phenomenistic *anti*-representational basis, then it's safe to say that, despite the fame of phenomenology, it continues to be misunderstood, by many if not most, as if it were *merely* a description of the form of representation. Husserl's repeated use of "consciousness" unfortunately encourages this reductive reading, which results in a quasi-representational unstable correlationism which is hard to distinguish from more typical forms of indirect realism.

Elsewhere I examine how the aspect metaphor resolves representationalist objections to (misunderstandings of) phenomenism or immaterialism. Sartre opens *Being and Nothingness* with his own very similar explanation. So this "aspect approach" is under-appreciated but not new. The work that *did* remain undone, it seemed to me, was the addition of how such an aspect approach worked in the larger *interpersonal* situation. In other words, what were or are the "global" implications of understanding the "first-personal" stream as ontologically *prior* to the "subject-object (or mind-world) dichotomy" ?

For instance, Wittgenstein tersely presents immaterialism (nondual phe-

nomenalism) in the *TLP*, starting at 5.6. He realized and emphasized that “consciousness does not exist.” At the same time, Wittgenstein understands that substance is subjectlike. *The world and life are one. I am my world. (The microcosm.) The thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing.*

So Wittgenstein, like Mach and James, adequately describes a *single* “personal continuum” or (neutral) “phenomenal stream.” Granted that one understands and accepts this, how is one to understand the world or reality *as a whole* ? If reality is not hidden “behind” my phenomenal stream or yours, how do we make sense of (properly glue together) this teeming *plurality* of streams ? If the world is not “behind” such streams, which have *some* kind of privacy, where is it ?

Leibniz gives us a clue in his *Monadology*.

And as the same town, looked at from various sides, appears quite different and becomes as it were numerous in aspects [perspectivement]; even so, as a result of the infinite number of simple substances, it is as if there were so many different universes, which, nevertheless are nothing but aspects [perspectives] of a single universe, according to the special point of view of each Monad.

The physicist Schrödinger, no mean philosopher, walks the same path.

Just as we can understand entities as logical-temporal-interpersonal syntheses of their actual and possible aspects, we can understand the world as the synthesis of all phenomenal streams, which we might call “monads,” though without adopting all that Leibniz intended by the term. These phenomenal streams or monads are (to use Schrödinger’s phrase) “aspects of the one.” Doing this is *ontological* perspectivism.

For the ontological perspectivist (in the above sense, anyway), the moments or aspects of entities are scattered “over” this plurality of streams, which includes of course their being scattered over time. Each phenomenal stream “is” time. You and I can intend the same object, even though the intended object shows itself differently to us. You see one side of the coin, I see the other. But we can both grasp that “face” or “side” or “aspect” of the coin *as* an aspect of one and the same coin.

Many representationalists might grant us “phenomenal streams,” but they would insist that these are “streams of consciousness,” understood by them therefore as streams of (private) *representation*. They might grant us something like an *epistemological* perspectivism. But this weaker approach fails. In general, representationalism has trouble accounting for the “ontological horizon,” which is its enabling condition. The problem with epistemological perspectivism, which it shares with every representationalism, is its participation in the same old reification of the subject-*like*-ness of “substance” into a mystified Consciousness Stuff.

And then inevitably to some version of Matter. (James' essay "Does Consciousness Exist?" is helpful on this issue.)

Let me elaborate on this "subject-like-ness of substance." All that I mean here is that the phenomenal stream has the "shape" or "character" of a stream of "experience." The problem with invoking experience is the suggestion of an experienc-er *outside of* this experience. The "panexperientism" (Severin Sjømark's term ¹) implied by James' "world of pure experience" *is* a genuine phenomenalism or immaterialism. But insufficiently careful readers may reify the subject-like-ness and subject-centeredness of the stream into a "Consciousness" that leads directly to the famous hard problem. This "hard problem" is, for phenomenalism, a pseudo-problem arising from an unquestioned but dominant metaphor.

Whether we call it "ontological phenomenalism" or "neophenomenalism" or "phenomenalism properly understood," this anti-representationalist position is not well known. While Husserl and especially Heidegger are recognized as great philosophers, it seems to me the phenomenistic basis of their work is insufficiently emphasized.

Without the cornerstone of *ontological* phenomenalism, they are both too easily read as describing an experience understood merely as private representation, trivializing them as ontologists. An indirect realist reading misses why Heidegger thought it was a scandal that Kant thought it

¹I had the pleasure of discussing this with Severin Sjømark through email and in the reddit r/Husserl.

was a scandal that philosophy lacked a proof of the External World. The ontological forum is presupposed by the project of ontology. The “world worlds” in partially but not radically isolated streams of aspects or moments of its entities. Language always already targets or intends *the* world. Feuerbach, demystifying Hegel, already saw this curious relationship between the sensual and the conceptual. While sensation is in some sense private, conceptuality is essentially public or social. The representationalist misinterprets the *perspectival* character of sensation to imply that perception must be representation. Instead, entities are logical-semantic syntheses of their “appearances.” When they show themselves “through” aspects or moments, they are not sending a representative or a substitute. Time is necessary for their unfolding, and they are never *done* unfolding.

Such aspects or moments are genuine “pieces” of the entity that will offer different “sides” of itself to others, or even to the same person later. These pieces are unified logically, inferentially. An entity is temporally and interpersonally shattered, but *not* into representations, as if the entity had some other, secret, “aperspectival” kind of being.

We intend *the* object, though we can of course also intend a passing “aspect” of that object. We can thematize a “moment” of an entity. We can thematize the ontological concept of the moment of an object, as so on. I can reason about your toothache, despite what might be described

as your privileged access to some of its qualities.