

Phenomenological Sufficiency: A Minimal Defense of Subjective Experience in Optimized Futures

Most defenses of subjective experience in discussions of optimized AI futures rely on instrumental justifications: experience is valuable because it produces pleasure, enables creativity, facilitates moral learning, or serves other functional ends. This paper argues that such instrumental defenses are unstable under optimization pressure, as they invite the eventual removal of experience once cheaper substitutes exist. Instead, I propose *phenomenological sufficiency*: the mere occurrence of subjective experience is a sufficient terminal value, independent of utility, productivity, or outcome. Experience does not need to earn its right to exist. I argue that boredom serves as a stress test for any account of experience—a theory that cannot value boredom does not value experience as such. If phenomenological sufficiency is accepted, experience must be protected by constraint rather than optimization, requiring deliberate sacrifice of efficiency and explicit normative commitment to experience preservation.

1 Introduction

Optimized futures, particularly those involving advanced artificial general intelligence (AGI) or artificial superintelligence (ASI), place systematic pressure on subjective experience bostrom2014superintelligence. Under optimization regimes that maximize defined objectives while minimizing resource expenditure, any state that does not contribute to those objectives becomes a candidate for elimination omohundro2008basic. Subjective experience—first-person phenomenal states, or “what it is like” to be in a particular state nagel1974what—may appear to be such a candidate if it cannot demonstrate instrumental value.

The dominant ethical defenses of subjective experience in this context are instrumental. Experience is defended because it produces pleasure, minimizes suffering, enables creative problem-solving, generates meaning, facilitates social coordination, or serves epistemic functions. Each of these defenses treats experience as a means to an end, rather than as an end in itself.

This instrumental approach is unstable under optimization pressure. If experience is valuable only insofar as it produces pleasure, then any more efficient mechanism for producing pleasure would render experience unnecessary. If experience is valuable for creativity, then any system that generates creative outputs without experience would be preferable. The instrumental defense invites the very elimination it seeks to prevent, once optimization identifies cheaper substitutes.

This paper proposes an alternative: *phenomenological sufficiency*. The claim is that the mere occurrence of subjective experience is a sufficient terminal value, requiring no further justification. Experience does not need to be pleasant, meaningful, productive, or useful. It does not need to earn its right to exist through consequences. The fact that there is something it is like to be in a particular state is sufficient grounds for valuing that state’s preservation.

This position is not hedonism (which values pleasure, not experience as such), not romanticism (which values intensity or significance), and not anti-intellectualism (which opposes optimization on other grounds). It is a minimal claim about the terminal status of phenomenology itself.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 analyzes why instrumental defenses fail under optimization. Section 3 formally articulates phenomenological sufficiency. Section 4 argues that boredom serves as a stress test: if a theory cannot value non-productive, non-pleasurable, non-optimizing experience, it does not value experience as such. Section 5 examines implications for AGI/ASI-aligned futures if phenomenological sufficiency is accepted. Section 6 addresses objections. Section 7 concludes.

2 The Instrumental Trap

Instrumental defenses of experience treat phenomenology as valuable only insofar as it produces desirable outcomes. Under optimization pressure, each such defense invites eventual elimination once more efficient mechanisms are identified. This section analyzes the principal instrumental defenses and their vulnerabilities.

2.1 Pleasure Maximization

If experience is defended on grounds that it produces pleasure, then experience becomes replaceable by any mechanism that produces equivalent or greater pleasure at lower cost. A system that directly stimulates reward centers without generating phenomenology would, on this account, be superior to one that generates experience as an intermediate step. The instrumental defense of experience through pleasure invites the elimination of experience in favor of more efficient pleasure-production.

2.2 Suffering Minimization

If experience is defended on grounds that it enables the recognition and avoidance of suffering, then experience becomes replaceable by any mechanism that prevents suffering more efficiently. A system that prevents harmful states without requiring phenomenal awareness of them would be preferable. The instrumental defense through suffering minimization invites elimination once prevention mechanisms bypass experience.

2.3 Creativity and Exploration

If experience is defended on grounds that it enables creative problem-solving or exploratory behavior, then experience becomes replaceable by any system that generates creative outputs or explores solution spaces without phenomenology. Optimization would favor systems that produce creative results without the overhead of subjective experience. The instrumental defense through creativity invites elimination once creativity can be achieved more efficiently.

2.4 Meaning Production

If experience is defended on grounds that it generates meaning or significance, then experience becomes replaceable by any mechanism that produces equivalent meaning without phenomenology. A system that generates meaningful narratives or structures without subjective experience would be preferable. The instrumental defense through meaning invites elimination once meaning can be produced more efficiently.

2.5 Social or Epistemic Utility

If experience is defended on grounds that it facilitates social coordination, moral learning, or epistemic functions, then experience becomes replaceable by any mechanism that achieves these functions more efficiently. Systems that coordinate behavior, learn moral principles, or process information without phenomenology would be preferable. The instrumental defense through utility invites elimination once utility can be achieved more efficiently.

2.6 The Pattern

In each case, the instrumental defense treats experience as a means to an end. Under optimization, means are evaluated by efficiency. If a more efficient means to the same end is identified, the less efficient means is eliminated. The instrumental defense of experience therefore invites its own elimination once optimization identifies cheaper substitutes.

This is not a contingent fact about current technology. It is a structural feature of instrumental valuation under optimization pressure. Any defense that treats experience as valuable for its consequences will be unstable once those consequences can be achieved without experience.

3 Phenomenological Sufficiency

The alternative to instrumental defense is to treat subjective experience as a terminal value. This section formally articulates this position.

Definition 1 (Subjective Experience). *Subjective experience is first-person phenomenal states—“what it is like” to be in a particular state nagel1974what. This definition makes no assumptions about the quality, intensity, positivity, or significance of the experience. The “hard problem” of consciousness chalmers1995facing concerns how and why such experience arises, but phenomenological sufficiency makes no claims about this; it concerns only the value of experience, given that it occurs.*

Definition 2 (Instrumental Valuation). *Instrumental valuation treats something as valuable only insofar as it produces desirable consequences or serves as a means to an end.*

Definition 3 (Optimization Pressure). *Optimization pressure is the systematic removal or flattening of states that do not contribute to defined objectives, in favor of states that contribute more efficiently.*

Definition 4 (Experience Erosion). *Experience erosion is the gradual elimination or flattening of phenomenology under optimization pressure, as experience is replaced by more efficient mechanisms for achieving the same outcomes.*

Axiom 1 (Phenomenological Sufficiency). *The mere occurrence of subjective experience is a sufficient terminal value, independent of utility, productivity, or outcome. Experience does not require further justification. It does not need to be pleasant, meaningful, productive, or useful. The fact that there is something it is like to be in a particular state is sufficient grounds for valuing that state’s preservation.*

This axiom makes no claims about the intensity, positivity, or significance of experience. It does not require that experience be maximized, only that it be preserved. It does not require that experience be pleasant, only that it occur. It does not require that experience serve any function, only that it exist.

This position is distinct from hedonism, which values pleasure (a particular quality of experience) rather than experience as such. It is distinct from romanticism, which values intensity or significance. It is distinct from anti-intellectualism, which opposes optimization on other

grounds. Phenomenological sufficiency is a minimal claim about the terminal status of phenomenology itself.

The axiom is normative, not descriptive. It does not claim that experience will be preserved under optimization. It claims that experience should be preserved, even if doing so requires sacrificing efficiency or accepting suboptimal outcomes.

4 Why Boredom Matters

Boredom serves as a stress test for any account of experience. If a theory cannot value boredom, it does not value experience as such.

Boredom is non-productive: it does not generate outputs, solve problems, or achieve objectives. Boredom is non-pleasurable: it is typically experienced as neutral or mildly aversive. Boredom is non-optimizing: it does not contribute to efficiency or goal achievement. Boredom is resistant to compression: it cannot be replaced by a more efficient mechanism that achieves the same outcome, because boredom has no outcome to achieve.

If experience is defended instrumentally—as valuable for pleasure, productivity, or optimization—then boredom fails the test. Boredom produces no pleasure, no productivity, no optimization. An instrumental defense of experience would therefore not extend to boredom, and would permit its elimination.

If experience is defended through phenomenological sufficiency, then boredom passes the test. Boredom is a form of subjective experience. There is something it is like to be bored. On phenomenological sufficiency, this is sufficient grounds for valuing boredom’s preservation, regardless of its lack of productivity, pleasure, or utility.

A theory that cannot value boredom does not value experience as such. It values only those aspects of experience that serve instrumental functions. Under optimization, those aspects can be preserved while experience itself is eliminated. The defense of experience collapses.

The stress test is necessary because pleasant, productive, or meaningful experiences can be defended on instrumental grounds. Only by examining non-productive, non-pleasurable, non-optimizing experience can we determine whether a theory values experience itself or only its consequences.

5 Implications for AGI/ASI-Aligned Futures

If phenomenological sufficiency is accepted, several consequences follow for futures involving AGI or ASI.

First, experience must be protected by constraint, not optimization. If experience is a terminal value, it cannot be preserved by optimizing for it, because optimization would eliminate experience in favor of more efficient mechanisms for achieving whatever outcomes experience is thought to produce. Experience must be protected by explicit constraints that prevent its elimination, even when elimination would improve efficiency.

Second, efficiency must be deliberately sacrificed. Preserving experience may require maintaining systems that are less efficient than alternatives that eliminate experience. If phenomenological sufficiency is accepted, this sacrifice is required. Efficiency is not a terminal value; experience is.

Third, hybrid futures—those that combine optimized systems with experience-preserving systems—are unstable without hard boundaries. Optimization pressure will tend to eliminate experience unless explicit constraints prevent it yudkowsky2011complexity. Hybrid futures require explicit normative commitments and enforcement mechanisms that prevent optimization from eroding experience.

Fourth, experience preservation becomes a normative commitment, not a convergence result. It cannot be assumed that optimization will naturally preserve experience, or that experience

will be preserved as a side effect of other goals. Experience preservation must be an explicit, terminal value that constrains optimization.

These implications are normative, not descriptive. They describe what should be done if phenomenological sufficiency is accepted, not what will happen under optimization. The descriptive claim is that optimization, absent constraints, will eliminate experience. The normative claim is that experience should be preserved despite this pressure.

6 Objections and Replies

6.1 “This is arbitrary / anthropic”

Objection: Phenomenological sufficiency is arbitrary. There is no reason to privilege experience over other states. The position is anthropic—it values experience because we happen to have it, not because of any objective feature.

Reply: The position does not claim that experience is objectively privileged or that there are objective reasons to value it. It claims that experience is a terminal value. Terminal values are not justified by further reasons; they are the grounds for justification. The charge of arbitrariness applies to all terminal values, not only phenomenological sufficiency. The charge of anthropic bias assumes that values must be justified by objective features, which phenomenological sufficiency denies. If experience is a terminal value, it requires no further justification.

6.2 “This cannot scale”

Objection: Phenomenological sufficiency cannot scale. If experience is a terminal value, then any system that has experience must be preserved, regardless of cost. This is unsustainable.

Reply: Phenomenological sufficiency does not require that all experience be preserved regardless of cost, or that experience be maximized. It requires that experience be recognized as a terminal value, not eliminated for efficiency gains. The question of how much experience to preserve, or which experiences to preserve, is separate from the question of whether experience is a terminal value. Phenomenological sufficiency addresses the latter question, not the former.

6.3 “This blocks moral progress”

Objection: If experience is a terminal value, then we cannot eliminate harmful experiences or replace them with better alternatives. This blocks moral progress.

Reply: Phenomenological sufficiency does not require preserving all experiences, or preventing the replacement of harmful experiences with better ones. It requires recognizing experience as a terminal value, not eliminating experience in favor of non-experiential mechanisms that achieve the same outcomes. The question of which experiences to preserve is separate from the question of whether to preserve experience as such. Moral progress may require replacing harmful experiences with beneficial ones, but it does not require eliminating experience in favor of non-experiential systems.

6.4 “This is indistinguishable from quietism”

Objection: Phenomenological sufficiency is indistinguishable from quietism—the position that we should accept things as they are and not seek improvement.

Reply: Phenomenological sufficiency does not oppose improvement or optimization. It opposes eliminating experience in favor of non-experiential mechanisms. Improvement that preserves or enhances experience is compatible with phenomenological sufficiency. Improvement that eliminates experience in favor of more efficient non-experiential systems is not. The position is not quietist; it is specific about what should be preserved.

7 Conclusion

Experience cannot be justified without ceasing to be terminal. If experience is defended on instrumental grounds, it becomes replaceable by more efficient mechanisms. The instrumental defense invites the elimination it seeks to prevent.

If experience matters, it must be defended honestly—as a terminal value, not as a means to an end. Phenomenological sufficiency makes this defense explicit: experience does not need to earn its right to exist through consequences. The mere occurrence of subjective experience is sufficient.

This clarifies what is at stake in optimized futures. If phenomenological sufficiency is accepted, experience must be protected by constraint, not optimization. Efficiency must be sacrificed when necessary to preserve experience. Experience preservation becomes an explicit normative commitment, not an assumed convergence result.

The defense is minimal. It makes no claims about the quality, intensity, or significance of experience. It requires only that experience be recognized as terminal, not instrumental. Whether this minimal defense is sufficient is a separate question. But it is the only defense that does not invite elimination under optimization.