

# ASPECT REALISM

## 1

*Aspect realism* is an immaterialism or phenomenalism that emphasizes the central role of the aspect metaphor in accounting for the “first-personal” character of what is called “experience.” It does so *without* adopting the indirect realism or representationalism that merely seems to be required to account for the way that the world is given always from this or that perspective.<sup>1</sup>

This immaterialism is what Blouin calls *ontological* phenomenalism. Representationalists unfamiliar with sources like Mill and Mach tend to project their own ontological assumptions on such phenomenalism, understanding it as subjective idealism.<sup>2</sup> Instead, immaterialism is as much a denial of Mind as it is of Matter.<sup>3</sup>

Immaterialism is not sensualism — the claim that reality reduces to sensation. It simply rejects the unjustified and self-contradicting assumption that some kind of Matter<sup>4</sup> hides “behind” “experience” or “consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> Sensualism’s “sensation” remains im-

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<sup>1</sup>Previously I’ve used the label “ontological perspectivism” for what I here call “aspect realism.” The earlier label is perhaps more descriptive, but it is used by others for something else.

<sup>2</sup>Berkeley’s work, despite its primary flaw of depending on God, was a *proto*-immaterialism that provided the clue needed by later thinkers like Mill. It’s worth looking at Popper’s investigation of Berkeley in *Conjectures and Refutations*.

<sup>3</sup>It is a “nondual” ontology, though the term “nondual” is contaminated by its use in logically careless conversations that prioritize mystical intuition. I speculate that the ancient nondual tradition included “dry” philosophers who are not appreciated for what I’d call their “logical positivism.” Ontology, following what is best in logical positivism, elucidates basic concepts, which is its own reward. This need not exclude nor include other more spiritual implications of such elucidation.

<sup>4</sup>I capitalize this term, which I take from J. S. Mill, to emphasize that Matter is an archetype or role that is “cast” differently by different representationalists.

<sup>5</sup>These terms are in quotes because they take the representational framework or metaphor for granted, and this

plicitly representationalist.<sup>6</sup>

## 2

Phenomenology still tends to be read by many as a representational or indirect realism. For this kind of reader, phenomenology merely focuses on the representation, ignoring how or whether it relates to the represented, to Matter. In other words, it accepts some version of the division of reality into Mind and Matter, and it contents itself with the study of Mind.

While this “representational” reading of phenomenology can still be valuable, it implies an incoherent ontology<sup>7</sup>— and *not* the intended *evasion* of ontology. To summarize and synthesize objections offered by Husserl and Karl-Otto Apel<sup>8</sup>, representationalism fails to integrate ontology’s enabling and therefore necessary entity. This is the ontological horizon itself<sup>9</sup>, the “forum” in which the scientific conversation takes place. Ontology presupposes an “ideal communication community,” and it is a performative contradiction to communicate any theory as warranted that implies the impossibility of communication or of war-

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unnoticed assumption is why phenomenism-as-immaterialism is misunderstood and under-appreciated.

<sup>6</sup>Mach’s elements are neutral, though he does use “sensation” as a synonym, in order to get himself understood. The value of aspect realism is perhaps a clarification of just this issue.

<sup>7</sup>The incoherence of representationalism is unnoticed because no one really believes it, except within a peculiar game. This is not to say that ontology should or tends to be practical. The impracticality of representationalism is only offered as an explanation of how a genuine flaw continues to be overlooked.

<sup>8</sup>This excerpt from *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* is helpful.

...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

<sup>9</sup>This “ontological horizon” (my term) is similar to the “hermeneutic situation.” As “horizon” it is the radically and “transparently” presupposed background or basis of inquiry. This horizon is a forum or “space of assembly” equivalent to a minimal concept of world that includes only what is necessary for the scientific project to be meaningful.

rant.

Representationalism fails to make sense of its attempted reference to *the* world, the same world it nevertheless hopes to explicate. What Kant called the scandal of philosophy was its failure to prove the existence of the External World. Here we see a great philosopher lapse into nonsense, thanks to his being trapped in a still transparent and therefore non-optional metaphor.<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, still insufficiently recognized as an immaterialist<sup>11</sup>, speaking as an escapee from the metaphor in question, writes that “a picture held us captive.” What Kant and other representationalists miss is that the notion of proof presupposes participation in a forum structured by logical norms — in an ICC<sup>12</sup> that is the essence of the “External” world for the ontologist *as such*.<sup>13</sup> If a solipsistic skepticism is possible as nightmarish delusion, it is, when *argued* for, an unstable performative contradiction.<sup>14</sup>

### 3

For aspect realism, an entity is the logical and therefore temporal and interpersonal synthesis or system

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<sup>10</sup>This metaphor, that perception is a subjective picture of something else, is an example of the *interpretedness* (Heidegger) that necessitates a *hermeneutic* or “archaeological” phenomenology. What seemed necessary is discovered to be contingent. We go back to original sources and find the birth of the metaphor that became so dominant that it also became transparent.

<sup>11</sup>See the *TLP* starting at 5.6.

<sup>12</sup>This is just the Ideal Communication Community, the ontological horizon

<sup>13</sup>To perform the “heroic” *role* of the rational-scientific philosopher, I need to presuppose its meaningful possibility — that there *is* a rationality that binds not only me but others in the same world. While the character of this world might be otherwise undetermined and subject to debate, my role is absurd without the conditions for its possibility.

<sup>14</sup>Indirect realists often argue that our commonsense understanding of the causal relationship between the human nervous system and mundane objects implies that perception is representation, that it gives only some kind of image in or as “consciousness”. They think they can show that external or physical world is always therefore mediated. The problem with such arguments is that a tacit direct realism is used *as a foundation* for an attack on this same direct realism. This is to saw off the branch that one sits on as one saws.

of its “aspects.” This visual metaphor comes from Husserl and Leibniz. A 3D object “needs time” in order to “unfold” or show itself, for it is only given in aspects that occlude one another. As “logically” intended, the “inexhaustible” object is always more than the particular aspects it has shown so far, or just to me or you.

[I]t transcends experience not only in the sense that it is not absolutely given, but also in the sense that, in principle, it *cannot* be absolutely given, because it is necessarily given through presentations, through profiles... The thing is given in experiences, and yet, it is not given; that is to say, the experience of it is givenness through presentations, through “appearings.” Each particular experience and similarly each connected, eventually closed sequence of experiences gives the experienced object in an essentially incomplete appearing, which is one-sided, many-sided, yet not all-sided, in accordance with everything that the thing “is.” Complete experience is something infinite.<sup>15</sup>

This “complete experience,” understood as an instantaneous consumption, is impossible because an entity *needs time* in order to show first this “side” of itself and then that one. Consider a coin whose sides cannot both be seen at once. To see one aspect is also to not see the others. In this sense, showing is also hiding. To unveil is also to veil.

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<sup>15</sup>from Husserl’s *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*

This is where the representationalist is tempted to posit an “actual” object “behind” and *other than* these perspectival parts. Instead of Husserl’s mitigated transcendence of such parts by their logical synthesis, they propose an absolute transcendence of what are therefore no longer parts but merely representations. For the indirect realist, the aspect is a symbol in the Mind that refers somehow to the Matter that causes that symbol to appear. This Matter is of course the *actual* thing, that which is represented within or “as” consciousness. *In order to find the real artichoke, we divested it of its leaves.*<sup>16</sup>

For aspect realism, *the aspects themselves are real*. They are neither Mind nor Matter, and they do not re-present but *present* the entity in the only way it *can* be presented. The entity is only hidden behind its aspects in the sense that unveiling is always also veiling — each aspect occludes all the others. The entity is the “system” of its actual and possible aspects, grasped logically as enduring through a varying manifestation of itself.<sup>17</sup>

Consider how music, which is invisible, gives itself “over time” without literally *showing* itself. This is an

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<sup>16</sup>from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*

<sup>17</sup>To know a person for a number of years is to see many “sides” of that person. But we are not usually tempted to think that a person is radically other than all the sides of themselves that they both have shown and might still show. Of course we include sides shown not only to ourselves but also those shown to actual and possible others.

example of why aspects (now used literally) should be understood as one variety of the “moments” of an entity. The entity is the logical-temporal-interpersonal synthesis or system of its moments.<sup>18</sup> This still includes the adumbrations of the spatial object, which is merely seen, but it now also includes all other entities, visible or not.<sup>19</sup>

For aspect realism the neutral phenomenal stream is ontologically primary. This “stream” is a “(first)personal continuum.” It is, in traditional terms, “subjectlike substance.” This is what a representationalist might call “phenomenal *consciousness*,” with the understanding that there is *also* a “real world” only contingently mediated by this consciousness. But the aspect realist, a direct realist without a soul<sup>20</sup>, understands this stream as a streaming of the being of the world itself, as its *only* kind of being.<sup>21</sup>

## 6

So far this essay has been a synthesizing paraphrase of my primary influences. Most of them were content to sketch the individual world-streaming “firstpersonal continuum” *without* saying much about what this im-

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<sup>18</sup>We constantly refer to objects that we presumably never see in the same way that others do. So we tacitly understand the object to include aspects not given to us but only others, actual or possible. Rationality, along with common sense, presupposes our “being together in language.” This is an “aspect” of the ontological forum, the ICC, and of course the familiar “lifeworld.”

<sup>19</sup>This paper could have started with “moments” and mentioned aspects in passing as an example, but I found the aspect approach of Husserl and Leibniz so helpful that I thought I should share and hopefully extend it here. It’s a small step to the generalization once the part-whole relation is recognized between the synthesized and the synthesis.

<sup>20</sup>This is a playful way to express the gist of Wittgenstein’s immaterialism in the *TLP*, at 5.6. “The thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing.” Sartre elaborates on this rejection of “Mind” in his *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

<sup>21</sup>This might be called *ontological perspectivism*.

plied for the world as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

Leibniz, however, already expressed this implied “global situation” in 1714, in his *Monadology*.

As the same town, looked at from various sides, appears quite different and becomes as it were numerous in aspects ; 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 of a single universe, according to the special point of view of each Monad.

In our terms, our one world is given only as or through a plurality of “worldstreamings,” each of which is what James called a “personal continuum.” The “substance” of the world is plural. The world, like the entities it features, is given in “aspects.” Entities in the world are “shattered and scattered” in the sense that their moments are spread across time *and* the plurality of mortal streams.

This gels with the claim that the entity is the logical and temporal synthesis of its moments. Logic “glues” these shattered “fragments” (aspects as parts) together, so that an enduring “interpersonal” entity is possible. It also results in an immaterialism which is *not* subjective idealism, for immaterialism rejects Consciousness <sup>23</sup> along with its elusive Other. There

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<sup>22</sup>For instance, Wittgenstein gives the tersest presentation of immaterialism that I’m aware of, but I don’t think this is even noticed by most, and that may be because he didn’t spell out the implications. Mach is far more generous in his *The Analysis of Sensations*, but he too is mute on the implied “global situation.” Mill is better than either on this particular issue, but he expressed his phenomenalism in a book focused on the work of another philosopher, and it is not much discussed.

<sup>23</sup>This is capitalized to refer to “ontological” consciousness or Mind, treasure of Mysterions.

is only “World,” and yet only through a plurality of perspectival streamings or “aspects.”

7

This is a “double generalization” of Husserl’s analysis of the spatial object. First we see that objects are syntheses of aspects. Then we see reality itself is the synthesis of its own “aspects” of a different kind. What seems to “force” the aspect solution in both cases is the perspectival or firstpersonal nature of each stream, as described here by James.

Each of these minds keeps its own thoughts to itself. There is no giving or bartering between them. No thought even comes into direct sight of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law. It seems as if the elementary psychic fact were not thought or this thought or that thought, but my thought, every thought being owned. Neither contemporaneity, nor proximity in space, nor similarity of quality and content are able to fuse thoughts together which are sundered by this barrier of belonging to different personal minds. The breaches between such thoughts are the most absolute breaches in nature. Every one will recognize this to be true, so long as the existence of something corresponding to the term ‘personal mind’ is all that is insisted on, without any particular view of its nature being implied. On these terms the personal self



rather than the thought might be treated as the immediate datum in psychology. The universal conscious fact is not 'feelings and thoughts exist,' but 'I think' and 'I feel.' No psychology, at any rate, can question the existence of personal selves. Thoughts connected as we feel them to be connected are what we mean by personal selves. The worst a psychology can do is so to interpret the nature of these selves as to rob them of their worth.

James elsewhere is unambiguously an immaterialist in his conception of "a world of pure experience."<sup>24</sup> But here we already have the private "streams" that are only indirectly connected. They are "streamings" of the same world "from a different perspective." Each stream has as its center an "empirical ego" who lives in the "normative field" of a "form of life," which includes the logical-semantic norms of the ontological forum.<sup>25</sup>

## 8

The SEP article on the undercelebrated Feuerbach provides us with an anticipation of how the ontological forum is "fused together" from the plurality of the world's aspects or streamings.

It is by means of *Empfindung* or sense experience that sentient beings are able to distinguish individuals from one another, including, in some instances, individuals that share the same essence.

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<sup>24</sup>See his essay, for instance, entitled "Does Consciousness Exist?"

<sup>25</sup>Robert Brandom's work foregrounds this ego as an intensely temporal locus of responsibility.

The form of experience is temporality, which is to say that whatever is directly experienced occurs “now”, or at the moment in time to which we refer as “the present”. Experience, in other words, is essentially transitory, and its contents are incommunicable. What we experience are the perceivable features of individual objects. It is through the act of thinking that we are able to identify those features through the possession of which different individuals belong to the same species, with the other members of which they share these essential features in common.

Unlike sense experience, thought is essentially communicable. Thinking is not an activity performed by the individual person *qua* individual. It is the activity of spirit, to which Hegel famously referred in the *Phenomenology* as “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (Hegel [1807] 1977: 110). Pure spirit is nothing but this thinking activity, in which the individual thinker participates without himself (or herself) being the principal thinking agent.

In less intimidating terms, to think involves the application of inherited self-transcending logical-semantic norms. Whether *P* legitimately follows from *Q* is not primarily up to me. “My” thinking is constrained by language that I did not choose. I was “thrown” into “interpretedness”. These norms are part of Wittgenstein’s “form of life” and Heidegger’s “who of everyday Dasein” or “Anyone.” Dreyfus likes the term “One,” as in “one does it this way.” This is why human “in-

being” is always also “being-with-others.”<sup>26</sup> A cast-away who thinks in an inherited language is not an exception. If culture is a “time-binding virus” in relation to a mortal body as host, then “I” am more virus than host, more “virtual We” than the flesh it puppeteers.<sup>27</sup>

It’s with this in mind that we can claim that ontology is the self-explication of the ontological forum. It is a time-binding Conversation that finally gets around to recognizing itself as the spider at the center of its web.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>I think that many animals are also “sites” of the world’s streaming, and that their associated streams are “subjectlike substance” too, though most don’t give indications of belonging to something like an ontological forum.

<sup>27</sup>If the immortal flame leaps from candle to melting candle, it nevertheless needs wax *in general*. This point is worth another quote from the SEP. “A biological species is both identical with, and distinct from, the individual organisms of which it is composed. The species has no existence apart from these individual organisms, and yet the perpetuation of the species involves the perpetual generation and destruction of these particular individuals. Similarly, Spirit has no existence apart from the existence of individual self-conscious persons in whom Spirit becomes conscious of itself (i.e., constitutes itself as Spirit).” This important qualification also applies in another situation. Some infer from the relative independence of a measurement from any particular measurer the additional independence of measurement from measurers in general. This unjustified move contributes toward the belief in “aperspectival” objects, a variety of “Matter.” On the other side, we get the attempt to derive a Mystic Information from the independence of information from any given *particular* medium.

<sup>28</sup>Robert Brandom’s work was so illuminating for me that I found myself claiming now and then to be a “neorationalist.”