

# *A Phenomenologist Looks at Ontology*

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[ <http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/ontology.html> ]

*Phenomena* (experiences) are the only means by which we know the universe. We can, of course, construct models or theories – *constructs* – of that which we cannot directly experience, but only on the foundation of phenomena.

Phenomena include not only things, but ideas, perceived actions, enacted actions, feelings or emotions, utterances, thoughts ("internal utterances"), images ("internal perceptions"), spatial relations, temporal relations, instrumental relations, meanings, and a few other events as well. When we talk about the experiencing of relations and meanings, we often use the term *intuiting*. We are nevertheless still referring to phenomena.

Phenomena do *not* include the supposed referents of constructs (including models or theories of that which we cannot directly experience...), although the words or symbols we use to *refer* to these constructs are indeed phenomena – a fact that frequently leads us to mistakenly *assume* that their referents are likewise phenomena.\*

There is an immediately perceivable coherence to the universe that we recognize intuitively as *reality*. Reality is not something that needs to be constructed, theorized, or modelled, although we may have many constructs *concerning* reality.

There is an immediately perceivable coherence to much of our experiencing that we refer to as *matter*. Qualities such as continuity of appearance, resistance to pressure, stability of form, and so on, or some combination of these, characterize matter. Clusters of such material experiences we refer to as *things*. One example of such a material thing is one's own *body*.

We do the same for a certain set of more internal, less material experiences, and label them *mental*. Exactly what a person or culture calls material or mental depends on the qualities they choose to define what is material or mental. In any case, many other experiences, and constructs as well, fail to meet either definition (e.g. space and time, mathematics and logic...).

The phenomena of spatial and temporal relations immediately suggest extension and continuity, or *space* and *time*. Space and time are neither material nor mental.

Among the relations we are capable of experiencing directly are those between ourselves and other entities. There is seeing, hearing, touching, and so on, as well as imagining, thinking, choosing, etc. Perhaps the most significant is *valuing*: An experience is meaningful to the extent that it is valued (positively or negatively). Positive valuing could be called *desiring*, negative valuing could be called *loathing*.

There is an immediately perceivable coherence to experiencing that leads us to intuitively recognize an *ego* – a viewpoint from which reality is experienced. We can experience it as composed of various components such as the powers of seeing, hearing, touching, etc., as well as the powers of thinking, feeling, will or agency, choice, etc. Again, the most significant is valuing.

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\* This distinction between phenomena and constructs has been an issue about which several people have emailed me for clarification. It is a difficult distinction because language and reality only loosely correspond! If you are presently thinking about a theory – say Freud's theory – the object of your thoughts is in fact a phenomenon, one called "Freud's theory." However, the theory has certain supposed referents – the mind and its parts and processes. A theory in that sense is a construct, in that the theory and its referents are not in fact truly connected. The ego is another example: If you are considering the ego as that-which-is-experienced-as the perspective behind our experiencing, then the ego is a phenomenon. But if the ego is a part of a theory it is a theoretical construct, whose referent may or may not be what the theory claims it to be. The "shorthand" way of thinking about this: If your words remain very closely tied to immediate experience, those words are referring to phenomena; If your words begin to part from immediate experience, you are moving into the realm of constructs. The Taoists are ultimately correct: If you can talk about it, you have already lost it!

We recognize intuitively that this ego is intimately related to one's body, and with certain mental events such as memories of past experiences and actions and patterns of desires and avoidances. These intimate experiences, together with the sense of an ego or viewpoint, could be properly called the *self*. Each culture – indeed, each individual – may define this self as involving different details.

*Causality* is another relation that we intuitively recognize within the consistency of certain sequential events. On the other hand, we also recognize a relationship of independence of the self from immediate external causes, which we may label choice, agency, or *will*.

We intuitively recognize as well that certain things are also bodies with experiencing selves or egos, called *others*. We do not need to infer or construct their similarity to ourselves: We perceive this quality of fellow-sentience immediately. We may perceive this with living entities very different from ourselves. The readiness to attach the label of "other" to creatures other than humans will differ from person to person and culture to culture.

*Sentience* arises when a valuing entity (i.e. a life-form) encounters reality. *Consciousness* arises when a sentient being is simultaneously sentient of both reality and its own relationship to that reality. *Self-consciousness* arises when a conscious being is aware of itself as both self and other. A being capable of self-consciousness is a *person*. As a person, one is capable of valuing oneself and one's actions, which is the foundation of *morality*.

These statements are all based on phenomenological introspection, and I view them as axiomatic. All the rest of my philosophical and psychological thinking is founded on them.