

**The Infrastructures of Experience:
An Introductory Primer for Systems Phenomenology**

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Introduction

Paleonymy is the art of recycling a word from the archives of history in the event that the words of our time are insufficient for communication. A well-deployed paleonym can rupture the foundations of an established order of thought and even institute a new infrastructure for hosting ideas to come. Franz Brentano established descriptive psychology after claiming to have revived the Scholastic concept of "intentionality" (the directedness and aboutness of our attention) in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger followed his work and institutionalized phenomenology as a distinct discipline. Brentano, Husserl, and Heidegger all claimed that intentionality was the answer to a foundational, if indirectly expressed, question of phenomenology: "What is the fundamental structure of experience?" Levinas would later reject that intentionality was the foundation of experience and instead argued that "affectivity" (the ability for us to receive experience from encounters with others). One cannot understate the significance of the belief in a fundamental architecture of experience on these thinkers because they use it to analyze the fountainhead of our experiences.

This question must be repealed and replaced. To do so, I will first give a more detailed history of responses to this question by Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas. Derrida's response to Levinas will prove useful to help transition the reader into putting this question under question. By leveraging the work of Derrida and Rodolphe Gasché, I recast the question into "What are the infrastructures for phenomena?" To speak of "infrastructures" (in Rodolphe Gasché's reading of Jacques Derrida's uses of the term) in the context of phenomenology implies that we must focus on the dynamic framework of systems that host phenomena instead of some grounding category of

experience of which the others are derivative. The purpose of this paper is not to give a conclusive answer to this new question, but rather to render it as such.

The Question of the Fundamental Structure of Experience

One of the difficulties of phenomenology is that one's experience changes when focusing on some phenomena. For example, I can remind you that you are breathing, and this reminder activates conscious recognition of your breath. Hence, the attempt to study a category of phenomena will alter experience in real-time, which prevents a "direct" or "unmediated" relationship with our own experiences while under philosophical or scientific analysis. Perhaps the reason for the popularity the perception that intentionality is the fundamental structure of our experience is its intuitiveness. Then again, perhaps its intuitiveness is a result of this answer becoming sedimented by phenomenologists' repetition of the idea. This belief that intentionality is the fundamental structure of experience is valorized, directly opposed, or taken for granted across the span of Western Continental thought in the 20th century. The argument that underwrites this idea is founded on the twofold belief that it is the legitimate answer to a certain question, and that this question is itself legitimate.

The question of identifying the fundamental structure of experience is not asked as a question by Brentano, Husserl, or Heidegger. These thinkers simply assert an answer. Brentano claims that "every mental object is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object" or what may be called "direction toward an object" (Brentano, p. 41). By placing "or mental" next to the word "intentional," Brentano demonstrates that he is so convinced that intentionality is fundamental that he uses these terms interchangeably.

Husserl, without naming the question he is responding to, brazenly affirms "Consciousness as Intentional Experience" in the *Logical Investigations* while refining Brentano's original formulation (Husserl, p. 78). Heidegger, as well, never directly asks what the fundamental structure of experience is. However, he declares "Intentionality as the structure of lived experiences" (Heidegger, p. 257). He follows Brentano and Husserl in claiming that every "lived experience, every psychic comportment, directs itself towards something" (Heidegger, p. 258). Note how he calls intentionality "the" structure of lived experiences, and thus purports intentionality as the singular, fundamental static architecture of all experiences.

Levinas, along with Brentano, Husserl, and Heidegger, did not explicitly ask the question of the fundamental structure of experience as such. Contra this tradition, he presents "subjectivity as a

welcoming of the Other, as hospitality” and declares that “intentionality, where thought remains an adequation to the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level” (Levinas, p. 27). To my knowledge, Levinas was the first to challenge the fundamentality of intentionality by focusing on experiences that cannot easily be characterized as outwardly directed. The phenomena of enjoyment is characterized as “a withdrawal into oneself, an involution” with the claim that “the “intentional” structure here is wholly different; the I is the very contraction of sentiment, the pole of a spiral whose coiling and involution is drawn by enjoyment” (118). The flows of enjoyment are inward, whereas Brentano’s “intentionality” refers to a structure that outwardly faces some particular focal point, even if what one is focusing on is oneself. Hence, there exists a phenomenon that cannot be derived from intentionality and thus intentionality cannot be the fundamental structure upholding all experience.

By putting “intentional” in quotes, Levinas questions concept while preserving the use of the term within its phenomenological context as the fundamental structure of experience. Levinas only challenged intentionality insofar as it was characterized as adequation to an intentional object. While his claims may seem like a radical departure from the idea of the fundamentality of intentionality, Derrida demonstrates that Levinas actually operates under the same logic as Husserl. While it appears that Levinas rejected intentionality, he actually “enlarged” the notion “beyond its representative and theoretical dimension, beyond the noetico-noematic structure which Husserl incorrectly would have seen as the primordial structure” (Derrida, WD, 1978, p. 118). Derrida argues that “Levinas’s metaphysics” presupposes the “transcendental phenomenology [of Husserl] that it seeks to put into question” (133).

Derrida also wrote about internal complications in Husserl’s notion of intentionality in *Speech and Phenomena*. Even if “intentionality never simply meant will,” it seems that Husserl “regards intentional consciousness and voluntary consciousness as synonymous” with respect to expressive experiences, which Husserl declares meaningless without animating intention (Derrida, 1973, p. 34). Husserl, for example, holds “that every intentional lived experience may in principle be taken up again in an expressive experience” as a condition for communication (34). Hence Derrida, with an eye towards the general history of phenomenology, declares that “in spite of all the themes of receptive, or intuitive intentionality and passive genesis, the concept of intentionality remains caught up in the tradition of a voluntaristic metaphysics” which declares that one’s will is fundamental for consciousness, and that everything else one expresses is merely derivative to that will (34). Upon asking “What does “consciousness” mean?” he responds that for people who believe in the metaphysical

primacy of presence over absence, “consciousness in all its modifications is conceivable only as self-presence, a self-perception of presence” (147). Further, consciousness is conceived “in the very form of “meaning” [“vouloir-dire”]” which in French directly translates to “wanting-to-say” (147).

For Derrida, consciousness has historically been seen as little more than the will and ability to make one’s voice, or thought, heard through speech. His description of this history challenges us to put this conception of consciousness under focus, which I believe is only possible by reorienting our inquiry about the architecture of experience.

Questioning the Question

Let us breakdown this question: “What is the fundamental structure of experience?” The placement of the “What is” implies on the one hand that “the fundamental structure of experience” is a singular and unique being (as indicated by the ‘what’). The question asks us to isolate a unique “structure of experience” which is “fundamental.” What it means for something to be fundamental may vary across thinkers (e.g., as we’ve seen, for Brentano, it means that every mental phenomena can be characterized as having an intentional structure, whereas for Husserl, all phenomena share intentional content). It is generally assumed that something can only be fundamental if it is indeed a thing.

There can be no fundamental structure of experience if there are no structures of experience. What is a “structure of experience”? First, what is a “structure”? According to Gasché, wherever one traces the traditional meaning of the term to its use in mathematics or its synonyms in Greek thought, ‘structure’ “refers to a constructed system functioning perfectly within itself” and hence necessarily hosts the property of “closure, according to which the passage from one structure to another can be thought only in terms of chance, hazard, or catastrophe” (Gasche, p. 144). He notes that the “concept of structure has always been thought with regard to a point of presence or fixed origin which turns its borders into the circumference of a totality” (144-145). Thus we have two conditions for something to be a structure: closure, and having an origin.

To write about the structure of experience (where the word “of” is used in the sense that expresses composition or substance) presupposes that experience has a structure. It is to assume that experience has some form of closure and that it has a fixed origin, in the sense of being a discrete entity. However, experiencing is a process that happens over time as should be evident by the duration it took to read or hear this sentence. Even historically, Husserl writes of the phenomenology of internal time consciousness. Heidegger finds time so important that the word is in the title of his

magnum opus. To talk about the “structure of experience” thus makes as much sense as attempting to study the “structure” of wind from a single representation of the positions of air molecules. Or, for a quantum analogue, of the “structure” of an electron analyzed at a given point knowing only everything about its position. Furthermore, the act of studying our experience changes our current experience into the experience of questioning some phenomena instead of simply experiencing that phenomena. There is no center of our experience that we can fix while also analyzing it as an experience of ours. As a result, knowledge of experience can never be a matter of simple adequation, because it is only made possible by making incisions that cut an experience off from the context or superprocess that hosts it. We are menaced by “the possibility of concealing meaning through the very act of uncovering it. To comprehend the structure of a becoming, the form of a force, is to lose meaning by finding it” (Derrida, 1978, p. 26). Experiencing is real-time process and hence, it is senseless to claim that “experience-as-such” has a static architecture (a singular, fundamental, and constitutive intrinsic or inherent composition).

“What is the structure of the space in this room?” Like experiencing, the space itself has no internal static architecture. The structure of this space is determined by the structure of the room, the frame, and not just what fills the space. We must be careful to distinguish between a frame and what is being framed. We can treat experiencing as a frame, and phenomena as its content.

Phenomena are what appear to us as part of the process of experiencing. They are the content of what we are experiencing, and cannot be held still without losing information about their dynamics. As a working hypothesis, I believe that phenomena are structured analogously to the wave-particle process-structure of an electron, or more generally, analogous to the process- structures of fluid and energy. Thus, we can speak of the “flow of experience” as the flow of phenomena through experience, as a sort of tunnel. An account of a generalized notion of fundamental intentionality cannot exist because of the oppositional and contradictory flow of inward- and outward-directed experiences. Indeed, the existence of phenomena with mutually exclusive process-structures implies that there cannot be a singular “fundamental” form that all phenomena may abide by. For example, the phenomena produced by silent meditation are very different than those produced by empirical observation.

The question of the fundamental structure of experience is misguided if experience does not have a classical (Newtonian) structure. But there is something important about the spirit of this

question: it guides and focuses the phenomenological endeavor, and hence cannot simply be cast off. There is another way to pose this inquiry.

(A) New Question(s)

Instead of looking for structures, we must trace out the infrastructures that host our experience. For Gasché, “infrastructures are economically and strategically minimal distributions or constellations—archesyntheses—of essentially heterogeneous predicates” (Gasche, p. 239). Following Derrida, he calls them the “irreducible complexity within which one can shape or shift the place of presence or absence: that within which metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics [bound by presence] cannot think” (147). They are the “irremediably plural” pre-ontological and pre-logical representatives of the relations which organize and thus account for “the differences, contradictions, aporias, or inconsistencies between concepts, levels, argumentative and textual arrangements, and so on” (147).

To ask “What are the infrastructures for phenomena?” implies that we must focus on what carries phenomena instead of some grounding phenomenal form (like intentionality) of which the others are derivatives. We can write both of what hosts the processes that route phenomena, as well as what systems can co-host mutually contradictory phenomena over time. Experiencing, as a framing of encountered phenomena, itself is an infrastructure for the processing of phenomena. It is not the sole infrastructure of phenomena since it is not the only form of encounter between oneself and one’s context (e.g., there is no ‘experiencing’ of sleep without perceived dreaming).

Because it hosts the flow of wave-like phenomena, the process of experiencing has the form of a channel. Channels of experience are the “tunnels” phenomena flow through. These channels are not static nor singular. Certain phenomena, whether through chemical supplementation or years of focused meditation, can be amplified, and thus improve the functioning of their respective channels. To channel (as a verb) is to willfully process phenomena as opposed to passively processing them. Intentionality is the capacity to channel directed intentions. Affectivity is the capacity to channel introjected affects.

Conclusions

One may object that writing about the infrastructures that serve phenomena means that we are no longer performing phenomenology because we have turned away from the study of phenomena in isolation of their conditions. However, phenomenology should not restrict itself to “the things

themselves” as Husserl would have it. We must go beyond the things themselves in order to get to the operating conditions for these phenomena and all non-phenomenal contextual factors that not only interface with phenomena but also impact them. Otherwise, phenomenology cannot account for the factors of change in phenomena. One may also object that I have not completely responded to the question. As I have demonstrated in practice, a response to a question does not necessarily have to be an answer to that question. Indeed, I never aimed to give a conclusive answer to the question of the infrastructures of phenomena in this paper (nor am I certain that any answer to this question could be conclusive).

To claim there is a fundamental structure of experience implies that experience has a classical structure, presupposes that there is a fundamental structure for it, and ignores the incompatibility of forms of processual phenomena with alternative directionality. To ask for the infrastructures for phenomena is to redirect a fundamental question of phenomenology away from looking for a common form or ground of all phenomena, and towards looking for common arrangements that host phenomena, in all their varieties.

By seeing phenomena as having a wave-form, we are no longer bound to ask about a “present” phenomenon. Rather, akin to the flow of electricity, we can ask about “current” phenomena to transcend certain limitations of 20th century mainstream phenomenology, e.g., the inability to naturalize phenomenology.

We may find that it is possible to define willful consciousness as a measure of our control of how many channels of attention one can alternate, synthesize, call upon, focus, and train. Indeed, this conception of phenomena as fluid waves of energy may make it easier to naturalize phenomenology by better specifying phenomena and locating their interactions with their physiological, sociological, anthropological, financial, political, and ecological (etc) infrastructures. I believe it is possible to use Systems Modeling Language (SysML) to perform these activities and I claim that correctly-charted models of the dynamics of subjectivity are embedded into models of the dynamics of intersubjectivity and interoperational objectivity. A strategy of mapping the flow and infrastructures of phenomena using SysML renders dualism relatively useless. By rejecting that the separation of experience from inert matter necessarily entails two separate and collectively exhaustive substances, we can study the flows of experience with higher resolution and in real-time.

The extent to which we are "conscious" (within a voluntaristic metaphysics) is the extent to which we are able to phenomenologically channel our internal energetic dynamics to alter our course

among the external contextual dynamics we find ourselves within. Hence, a path has opened to construct a notion of consciousness that does not inherently exclude the capabilities of non-human lifeforms by presuming the necessity of the self-perception of presence.

This brings me back to the question I originally posed to myself: Why do people say “we’re on the same wavelength” or “there are good vibes in this room” or “I feel your energy”? Something important is unleashed in this use of language: the idea that one’s experiencing of another has energetic dynamics. The mood of a person, or a crowd, appears as a transphenomenal entity, a fluid and energetic phenomenal composition with material consequences. How we should influence and treat each other is a question worthy of anybody trying to live a good life. Perhaps the question of love is the question of how to channel another through your attention.

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