

Mind World

Essays in
Phenomenology
and Ontology

David Woodruff Smith

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Essays in Phenomenology and Ontology

This collection explores the structure of consciousness and its place in the world, or inversely the structure of the world and the place of consciousness in it. Among the topics covered are the phenomenological aspects of experience (inner awareness, self-awareness), dependencies between experience and the world (the role of the body in experience, the role of culturally formed background ideas), and the basic ontological categories found in the world at large (unity, state-of-affairs, connectedness, dependence, and intentionality). Developing ideas drawn from historical figures such as Descartes, Husserl, Aristotle, and Whitehead, the essays together demonstrate the interdependence of ontology and phenomenology and its significance for the philosophy of mind.

David Woodruff Smith is Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine.

*For Mary and Wyndham,
whose creative minds complete my world*

Prolegomena: The *Terroir* of Consciousness and the World

This book explores the structure of consciousness and its place in the world or, inversely, the structure of the world and the place of consciousness in it. Some essays focus on phenomenological aspects of conscious experience; others on the world at large, especially the importance of basic ontological categories. Some develop ideas drawn from historical figures (e.g., Descartes, Husserl, Aristotle, Whitehead), while looking to structures of consciousness and the world. I want to put these essays between the covers of one book because, as I see them, their views work together like photos of a common field taken from different perspectives.

The ideas gathered here have evolved mostly in the *terroir* of California, where ideas and cultures mix uncommonly. California phenomenology. California ontology. California syncretism. Not without a sense of history (even in California).

The essays cut across the fields of phenomenology and ontology. The interdependence of ontology and phenomenology, as well as its significance for philosophy of mind, is a running theme of the collection as a whole. This interdependence I see as part of the systematic character of philosophy as a whole, a systematic unity rejected by much of twentieth-century philosophy, not least in separating phenomenology from wider metaphysics (in the wake of Kantianism, positivism, pragmatism, existentialism).

Frequently the essays address issues in philosophy of mind, the most vigorous area of recent philosophy in the analytic tradition. Yet my perspective does not begin with current issues of the relation between mind and body – issues of physicalism, functionalism, supervenience, and the like (as in Fodor, Dennett, Searle, Dretske, Kim, the Churchlands).

Rather, my perspective begins with more purely phenomenological and ontological issues: issues of consciousness, intentionality, and ontological categories.

The essay in Chapter 1 distinguishes three fundamentally different ontological aspects of consciousness, which separate areas of terrain explored variously in other essays. Subsequent chapters analyze consciousness in its basic phenomenological structure (intentionality, inner awareness, volition, action), in its environmental conditions (brain activity, physical surroundings, cultural background), and ultimately in its “deep” ontological structure (basic categorial forms or modes of being, such as being intentional, being dependent on brain, culture, etc.). The later chapters explore ontological categories in their own right, while keeping an eye on consciousness.

The collection affords, I hope, a unified though by no means complete view of mind-and-world (the unity implied in the book’s title). However, I do not wish to axiomatize here; I let the essays speak for themselves after previewing them with a broad story line. I find the essays mutually reinforcing, although each was written to stand alone, as far as possible. There are points of overlap, interlocking the essays, yet common themes may be approached from different directions.

The essays are broadly analytic in style and approach (Austro-Anglo-American philosophy). They are often phenomenological in content and method and background (continental European philosophy). They are recurrently ontological or metaphysical in content (joining a long history of Western philosophy). And they are sometimes historical in content and method (reflecting a long and global tradition of philosophy). In this way the book combines elements of philosophy that are often kept separate.

There is a vision that I hope develops over the course of the present book: that the structure of consciousness, with all the properties we find in it through phenomenology, finds its home in the complex structure of the world, with all the forms we find recounted in a systematic ontology. Only by working our way into both phenomenology and ontology, in an integrative way, can we develop this vision.

The term *terroir* is used by French vintners to incorporate all the elements of the vineyard, including the roles of geology, climate, and culture in the making of wine. The term has caught on in the California wine country. Now, the philosophical *terroir* of California has produced local varietals of phenomenology and ontology, and these essays partake of those varietals in seeking the *terroir* of consciousness in the world.

Consciousness: its distinctive experiential characters, its place in the ground of things, its being in the air in philosophy, its cultural inheritance – these are the things we must attend to in consciousness. The world: its basic categories, its diverse formal structures, its niche for consciousness – these are the things we must attend to in the world at large.

How shall we study structures of consciousness and the world?

We understand consciousness in the first place by simply experiencing it. Phenomenology is the philosophical discipline that seeks to describe, interpret, and analyze our own conscious experience, just as we experience it from our own first-person perspective. But phenomenology alone does not tell us the place of consciousness in the world.

We understand the world at large by way of everyday experience and increasingly by what empirical science discovers and hypothesizes. Ontology, or metaphysics, is the philosophical discipline that seeks to analyze the basic shape of the world. But today ontology is accountable to the remarkable empirical-theoretical results of modern science. Accordingly, the task of ontology is to frame what we know about the world, including structures of our own conscious experience, structures of the things we encounter in everyday life, and structures of what we know through empirical science.

Interestingly, the approach of modern science has left consciousness itself as one of the most pressing problems of cognitive neuroscience (the *science* of mind) and the hottest topic in recent philosophy of mind *cum* cognitive science. We philosophers and scientists together have not found a way to fit the properties of consciousness as we experience it (featuring intentionality, inner awareness, sensory qualia, volition, etc.) into the world as we know it in contemporary science (featuring quarks, quantum fields, evolution of organisms, black holes, etc.). In order to understand the nature of consciousness and how it fits into the world, what we need from the side of philosophy is a more careful synthesis of more careful phenomenology and more careful ontology. Yet the disciplines of phenomenology and (formal) ontology are too little evident in the exhilarating discipline today called philosophy of mind or, in its more scientific reaches, cognitive science. Indeed, the thought of bringing together all these fractious disciplines (and their disciples!) calls to mind an old Bette Davis line: “Fasten your seat belts, . . . it’s going to be a *bumpy* night!” Nonetheless, that is what lies ahead of us.¹

In the following chapters I pursue a particular synthesis of phenomenology and ontology. However, I leave for the Appendix a more explicit account of how I conceive of phenomenology and ontology and

their integration. These are matters of controversy, reaching into broad metaphilosophical positions; I try to stake out my territory in these matters in the Appendix.

My conception of phenomenology and ontology and their interdependence, as practiced here, has evolved through several overlapping “eras” in my philosophical experience. A sense of this background may help to indicate where I am going as well as where I am coming from, and this sense calls to mind my gratitude to a number of teachers (including my students and collaborators).

When I moved from mathematics into philosophy as a graduate student at Stanford in the late 1960s, what crossed my path, after Donald Davidson’s philosophy of language, was Jaakko Hintikka’s possible-worlds logic of perception followed by Dagfinn Føllesdal’s development of Husserlian phenomenology. By 1982 Ronald McIntyre and I had put together our collaborative interpretation of these things in a book that took us ten years to write. Here was California phenomenology at work.²

At Stanford I also acquired an appreciation of the history of philosophy and its contemporary relevance, absorbed from the teaching of John D. Goheen and two European logicians (Dagfinn and Jaakko) who read historical texts as seriously as today’s. When I took my first philosophy courses, at Northwestern while an engineering and mathematics student, I wanted to know the truth about things, not who said it and when. Slowly, but surely, I have learned that the genealogy of philosophical concepts, in texts of bygone years, carries a great deal of their content. Indeed, there is something phenomenological in understanding an idea by tracking its historical evolution. With ideas as with organisms, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In William Faulkner’s words, “The past is not forgotten, it is not even past.”

In 1982 I got a telephone call inviting me to talk about phenomenology’s relevance to software design. Thus began my twenty-year philosophical discussion with Charles W. Dement. We started by assessing Sartre’s ontology, and we have been talking ever since about issues in formal ontology *cum* phenomenology, ranging from Anaximander and Aristotle to Husserl, Ingarden, Whitehead, and Ernst Mayr (yes, the biologist). This work was part of a formal research program at Ontek Corporation (incorporated in 1985): designing systems of computational ontology *cum* phenomenology. (Ontek’s work was the first of this kind.) Here was California ontology in the making. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, our philosophical research – and the iterations of systems built by

the Ontek team that were based on that research – moved from categories, states of affairs, and modalities (ontic and epistemic) to basic “modes” (including manyness, composition, dependence, intentionality) and on to what we have called “systematics” or “metasystematics” (marking ontological distinctions and their role in the formal genesis of entities, in a kind of analogy with biological systematics). Our work over the years also involved close collaboration with logician Peter Woodruff and ontologist Peter Simons (thinkers from the world of academic philosophy) and with Ontek systems designer Steve DeWitt and master programmer John Stanley (philosophical thinkers from the real world).

On a parallel track through the 1990s I was drawn back into Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, this time with my eyes focused more closely on formal ontology. Although my results and stance in these essays are often far from Husserlian, I found in Husserl an important case study in how phenomenology, ontology, and logic (think of formal semantics) work together. In my current view, Husserl joins Aristotle, Kant, and Whitehead as the most systematic of philosophers. A series of conferences, with occasions to present papers on these things, has helped me to develop this new perspective on Husserl and on the synthesis of ontology and phenomenology (and logic). There were conferences in Bordeaux in 1995, Leeds in 1996, Bolzano in 1997, Copenhagen in 2000, Montreal in 2001, Memphis in 2001.

For many years I have worked with small groups who gathered in southern and northern California for informal discussions of aspects of intentionality. In these forums I have talked with Ron McIntyre, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Izchak Miller (until his untimely passing), Bert Dreyfus, John Searle, Allan Casebier, Martin Schwab, Dallas Willard, Rick Tieszen, Wayne Martin, Amie Thomasson, Jeff Yoshimi, and others. I have also enjoyed conversations over the years, often in Europe, with Barry Smith, Peter Simons, and Kevin Mulligan, Ltd., the threesome British champions of formal ontology (and its history in Brentano, Husserl, et al.).

Meanwhile, I have been fortunate to work with a string of gifted graduate students at Irvine, expanding my horizons as their dissertations unfolded. In nearly weekly discussions with each, many of the ideas below have circulated in various garbs. Jeff Yoshimi, Paul Livingston, Tim Schoettle, Linda Palmer, Jason Ford, Kay Mathiesen, Joe Tougas, Dan Zelinski, Amie Thomasson, John Bickle, Jim Zaiss, Kent Baldner – these perceptive younger minds have taken very different directions. It has been fascinating to see, from my office chair, how things are related, from neuroscience to mysticism, from the ontology of art to the ontology of

politics, from phenomenology to philosophy of language to philosophy of mind, and from one historical figure to another.

My kindest thanks to all these good people, without whom . . .

The mixing of ideas, ideals, cultures, and peoples is a natural pattern of human evolution. California in particular presents a form of cultural confluence demonstrating this fact of life on earth. Today's "California" looks toward Asia and Latin America as much as Europe, as well as Africa and the Middle East. The mix and flux of this California is a daily experience for all who have been fortunate to inhabit the richness of the University of California in recent decades, not least on the Irvine campus where I teach.

Yet the modern ethos – from science to human rights – is felt as deeply threatening to many people across the globe. Science and rationality have overridden traditions of spirituality and of ethnicity. In this century many peoples and their values will mix more than ever before. The challenge is how to honor difference amid sameness – not least in light of the fact that we are all hurtling through space on a planet that we may obliterate simply because we cannot sustain our own species along with other life forms. The events of 11 September 2001 shook the world, in ways we have yet to understand.

And yet, constant flux is not without history, not without continuity, and not without form, as Whitehead's ontology declares. (The essay in Chapter 7 draws on that ontology of flux.)

Something of the *Zeitgeist* – the constant flux of different ideas from different cultural and philosophical origins – is at work in the essays gathered here. Not usually by design, of course, as the spirit moves us mostly in ways we do not see. California's openness to new things has encouraged my looking to "other" philosophical traditions. Indeed, the mixing of ideas in a multicultural way is an important part of the background of the essays in this book. (Including the one titled "Background Ideas" in Chapter 5, first published in Italian in Rome.)

My thanks thus to the intellectual *terroir* of "California."

Notes

1. The relevance of Husserlian phenomenology for cognitive science has been explored in two anthologies: Hubert L. Dreyfus (with Harrison Hall), ed., *Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982); and Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and

Jean-Michel Roy, eds., *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press in collaboration with Cambridge University Press, 1999). From a different perspective, the analytic tradition in philosophy of mind, in the parts most relevant to my concerns, has been highlighted in Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere, eds., *The Nature of Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997); however, the phenomenological tradition, with its rich panoply of results, is not drawn into the latter volume. Meanwhile, a new collection is imminent, joining results from both classical phenomenology (as a discipline) and contemporary philosophy of mind: David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomasson, eds., *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind* (forthcoming). Of course, many analytic philosophers remain uncomfortable with the first-person, phenomenological approach to consciousness, and a few reject the existence of phenomena of consciousness. On the other hand, many phenomenologists remain uncomfortable with the naturalism of scientifically oriented philosophy of mind, often setting “transcendental” phenomenology in opposition to any naturalistic explanation of consciousness, intentional content, or meaning in general. Stay tuned for my take on such issues.

2. The school of so-called California phenomenology began with Dagfinn Føllesdal’s teaching at Harvard and Stanford in the 1960s, joined by Hubert Dreyfus’s teaching at Berkeley. This conception of phenomenology, and its Husserlian foundations, is laid out in two volumes: Hubert L. Dreyfus, ed., *Husserl, Intentionality and Cognitive Science* (1982, cited in note 1); and David Woodruff Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality: A Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1982). The latter work remains the only book-length development of the neo-Husserlian theory of intentionality that evolved in the “California” tradition (in fact, a particular variant on the theory emphasizing horizon as well as noema, and detailing connections with Fregean and possible-world semantic theory as well).

Origins of the Essays

The essays in Chapters 1, 2, and 4–7 were originally published as indicated and have been edited here for uniformity of style:

“Three Facets of Consciousness,” *Axiomathes* 12 (2001): 55–85.

“The Cogito circa AD 2000,” *Inquiry* 36 (3) (September 1993): 225–54.

“Consciousness in Action,” *Synthese* 90 (1992): 119–43.

“Background Ideas” appeared in Italian translation as “Idee di sfondo,” *Paradigmi* (Estratto da PARADIGMI, Rivista di critica filosofica) (Rome), Anno XVII, no. 49 (January–April 1999): 7–37.

“Intentionality Naturalized?” in Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy, eds., *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press in collaboration with Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 83–110. The essay has been translated as “L’intentionnalité naturalisée?” in Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy, eds., *Naturaliser la phénoménologie: Essais sur la phénoménologie contemporaine et les sciences cognitives* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2002), pp. 105–42.

“Consciousness and Actuality” appeared as “Consciousness and Actuality in Whiteheadian Ontology,” in Liliana Albertazzi, ed., *The Dawn of the Cognitive Science: Early European Contributors* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), pp. 269–97 – only the title is changed, for aesthetic parallel.

I am most grateful to the original publishers for permission to reprint these essays in the present book: to Taylor and Francis, Ltd., publisher of the journal *Inquiry*, in which Chapter 2 appeared; to Stanford University

Press, publisher of the volume *Naturalizing Phenomenology*, in which Chapter 6 appeared; and to Kluwer Academic Publishers, publisher of the journal *Axiomathes*, in which Chapter 1 appeared; publisher of the journal *Synthese*, in which Chapter 4 appeared; and publisher of the volume *The Dawn of Cognitive Science*, in which Chapter 7 appeared.

The essays in Chapters 3 and 8 are published here for the first time:

"Return to Consciousness": this essay aims to update, revise, and amplify my analysis of "inner awareness" in *The Circle of Acquaintance* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989) and "The Structure of (Self-)Consciousness," *Topoi* 5(2) (1986): 149–56.

"Basic Categories": this essay includes material from a series of four lectures I gave in the 1997 Bolzano International Schools in Cognitive Analysis at the conference "Categories: Ontological Perspectives in Knowledge Representation" in Bolzano, Italy, 15–19 September 1997; the essay reflects my work on ontology in collaboration with colleagues at Ontek Corporation since 1982 and a series of courses and seminars I taught at the University of California, Irvine, during the 1990s.

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Overview: A Story Line

The Background

In a moment I will sketch a line of argument, or rather narrative, that weaves through the essays gathered here. But first let me recall some background notions broadly assumed in that story line.

Consciousness is a consciousness “of” something, and this of-ness – called *intentionality* – is the tie that binds consciousness and world together.

Intentionality is itself the structure in which we know about the world. This structure begins with mental and practical acts on the one hand and objects of various types on the other. Phenomenology works from intentionality into structures of experience, or conscious mental activity, whereas ontology works *inter alia* from intentionality into structures of the world in general (including mental activity). We do not normally think of ontology as beginning with intentionality. As Quine has stressed, however, our ontology consists of what we posit in our preferred theories – what we posit, I note, in our intentional activities of theorizing.

So we may think of working from intentionality into phenomenology on the one hand and into ontology on the other hand. In one direction lies “subjective” structure; in the other lies “objective” structure. Both directions are pursued in the essays gathered in this book, but the subjective and objective, I urge, are part of one world with a unified structure. (By contrast, Descartes posited two realms of mind and body, and Kant separated two spheres called phenomena and noumena, or things-as-they-appear and things-as-they-are-in-themselves.)

Since Husserl's work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, philosophers have come to define intentionality as the property of a mental state's being "of" or "about" something – in the sense that (following Husserl) consciousness is (almost always) a consciousness "of" something. The concept of intentionality has been developing since at least Aristotle, but it came into its own in Husserl. In the background of the essays in this volume lies a reconstruction of Husserl's basic theory of intentionality.¹ What I rely on is mostly an appreciation of the phenomenon of intentionality, including intentional content and the intentional relation of mental act to object. This much is broadly Husserlian but shared by other philosophers who take seriously "first-person" consciousness and content.²

Very briefly, the content theory of intentionality, in the form I prefer, holds that intentionality consists in a complex structure of context, subject, act, content, and object – that is, within a certain context a person or subject performs or experiences an act of consciousness (thinking, seeing, willing, etc.) with a certain content (thought, image, etc.) that represents or "intends" a certain object (individual, state of affairs, event, etc.). In that way consciousness is intentionally directed toward an object. Schematically:

context | — subject — act — content —> object.

The context includes the background conditions on which the intentionality depends. The subject is the person who is conscious. The act is the state or event or process of thinking, perceiving, imagining, desiring, willing, or whatever. The content is the ideal or abstract "meaning" entertained in the act. That content represents something, which is the object of the intentional act, that which the subject is conscious "of" – in a certain way defined by the content and conditioned by the context.

A special range of cases that have interested me are those in which the subject is directly acquainted with the object, as in visual perception. Here the content is naturally expressed by indexical words such as "this," "here," "I," "her," etc. The intentional or semantic force of the intrinsically "indexical" content of an act of acquaintance depends on the context of the act: my perception of "this" tree depends on which tree is in my visual environment as I see "this." The structure of acquaintance figures in some studies in this volume, so I point toward it here in preview. What may be less familiar is how the case of acquaintance is handled in a content theory of intentionality.³ In this form of intentionality mind and world are most intimately connected.