

ONTOCUBISM

1

“Ontocubism” is the latest name¹ for what’s basically an updated phenomenism. I consider Mill, Mach, and James to be the great classic phenomenists.
² “My” phenomenism is “updated” with the help of (especially) Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Brandom. Ontocubism can also be viewed as an update of the monad theory of Leibniz.

2

An entity is the “logical” synthesis of its moments. As in temporary, spatial, interpersonal synthesis. The object is here, there, now, later, for me, for you, etc. But it is *the* object through its “identity” or “constituting ideality.” Our co-intending of the object is what I’m aiming at here. The idea of the object is also ideal. Co-intending can fail, and the “forum” is fundamentally open. So objects are “ajar.” For instance, centuries from now readers may be able to discuss the cup of coffee mentioned in this sentence.

I read the esoteric doctrine Plato as if Plato wrote *Of Grammatology*. Signs are things in the world. Even the “voice in my head” is a “logical-intentional object” which is *therefore* in the world. Logic is prior to subjectivity. Subjects are “empty.” They are merely

¹I’ve also used, for instance, “aspect phenomenism” and “aspect realism.”

²I *don’t* include Berkeley, who included not only a “substantial” subject but also a God who played the role of matter in his system.

“implied” by the “perspectival character” of perceptual presence. That puts it too strongly, though, for “linguistic empirical subjects” are components of the “Forum” or ontological horizon which is tacitly presupposed by any rational conversation.

You might say that we have an empirical-linguistic-normal subject which is in the world with other entities. Then we have an ontological (non-)subject which is something like the presence of entities that are present. In short, consciousness is understood in terms of the perspectival streaming of the world itself. So what James called a “personal continuum” is a “torrent of naked reality.” What’s tricky about this (which I borrow from Wittgenstein) is that the “ontological ego” or perspectival streaming of the world is articulated by the beliefs of the associated linguistic-empirical ego. This is arguably why witness consciousness was called “witness” consciousness in the first place.

It should be noted that these torrents are *themselves* logical-intentional objects. They are quasi-fundamental. We can arguably dissolve them into streamed situations that can themselves be understood in terms of moments of entities. Yet these subjects are also components of the rational forum. It is selves who argue for this or that belief being more or less warranted than rival beliefs. So selfhood (and complementary “otherhood”) are not so easily reduced to non-normative entities. The Forum includes the normativity of rationality and the “sign system” or “logic” that is prior to subjects.

We have after all replaced the thing in itself with an ideal co-intending of the thing, also called the idea or the identity of the thing. Following the esoteric Plato (as I interpret him), this “constituting ideality” is fundamental and irreducible. The “qualitative continuum” that it always already organizes is equally fundamental. Or shall we say quasi-fundamental? What is officially fundamental is their confusion or entanglement. Plato can be read as trying to point out the two “poles” (discrete and continuous) of a reality that never completely either.

In form familiar terms, reality is sensation organized by concept. There is no *pure* sensation, and there is no “pure” concept. Signs are relatively pure concept, while untitled abstract painting are relatively pure sensation. I use “sensation” as a familiar term, but I should emphasize that we are not constructing the world from “sensation” here. What is “given” is, for instance, familiar “transcendent” objects in the world. Of course Mill called matter the “permanent possibility of sensation,” but he was challenging a particular mystification. I view ontocubism as taking on that same mystification, but thinkers who came after Mill have given us the tools to make clear that *nothing like subjective idealism is intended here*.

We turn the subject inside-out like an old sock. We empty the subject. The supposed contents of “mind,” if speakable at all, are always already essentially public logical-intentional objects. My toothache is only “mine” in a limited sense. I can use it as a reason for going to the dentist, for snapping at a coworker,

etc. I credit Brandom's work for helping me see this. Inferentialism is illuminating.

When I say "speakable," I mean something like "having an identity." Or "being intend-able." I count this as something primary. It helps constitute the "forum." This "forum" is, again, tacitly presupposed as something like the set of the conditions for the possibility of rational conversation. It is therefore ontology's necessary entity, latent in the very concept of ontology.

I take Derrida to show (among other things) that *the subject is not a container*. What this container subject was supposed to contain was *pure* concept. Of course indirect realism also stuffed this "container subject" with representations or images of entities. To "turn the subject inside-out" is to understand with Wittgenstein that "experience is world and does not need the subject." But "experience" includes thoughts and feelings. The "unspoken sign" (a token in the internal monologue) is perhaps the *least tainted* or "most ideal" kind of object in the world. It can't (yet) be weighed. It has no length. For the most part it can be at least temporarily concealed from others, though technology may eventually peer into this last hiding place.

We can of course speak in terms of a continuum of the relatively "inner" and the relatively "outer." It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Here we have aesthetic attributes of entities stuffed into the container subject, leaving behind attributes that are

less dependent upon the perceiver. This use of the “container subject” is practical. For many purposes, we want to “flatten out” what is perspectival in perception. We also generally care about the object as it exists in the absence of any *particular* perceiver. This tempted some philosophers into the nonsense of the object as it exists in the absence of *all* perceivers, which crucially includes all possible and not only all actual perceivers.

Am I saying that objects cannot exist without subjects ? Not quite. I will say that rational discussion can’t exist without the forum that enables it. But let us put that issue aside. A “perception” is probably best understood as a “neutral” aspect or moment of the entity. We might say that a “phenomenal stream” is a way of *organizing* these neutral moments. These moments are “neutral” in the sense that they are neither “mind” nor “matter.” They just are what they are. But we tend to talk in terms of perception as an activity of a subject or perceiver.

As Mach saw, however, the “subject” is one more object in the field, at least as a merely empirical object. Wittgenstein gets at something similar in the *Tractatus*.

If there is something like a subject necessary for objects, it would be what Plato calls “The One,” which I read as categoricity or “constituting ideality.” A “full-fledged” perception is “meaningful.” The “sensory presence” is unified and “bounded.” This can take the highly indeterminate form of “that mysterious shape in the clouds” or “that faint, high-pitched

ringing.” It can be as vague as “something” or “whatever that thing was.”

Recently a person I respect as a philosopher suggested that something like a undifferentiated qualitative plenum or chaos was prior to conceptual articulation. He claimed that this had a genuine, independent existence. This reminds me of Nietzsche’s notion of a chaos that is beat into shape. My objection was that this was already *saying too much*. To grasp it as an entity is to drag it into the space of reasons. It becomes a logical-intentional object, which is exactly what it’s not supposed to be.

Others might claim that they have “experience” that is “pre-conceptual” or “trans-conceptual.” I don’t know how to prove that they are wrong, but I don’t see how a case can be made for these experiences. They are *by definition* outside the space of reasons.

I may betray my rationalistic tendencies by saying so, but I imagine that relatively rational mystics would avoid trying to say what they say cannot be said. Because this type keeps silent or avoids philosophical conversation, I’ve only interacted with those who hint at the Ineffable — and then go on to *argue* for what is beyond the inferior rational mind.

This is a good spot to emphasize what I call the “forum” or “ontological horizon.” This is the anti-skeptical component of ontocubism. In short, it’s a performative contradiction to deny any of the conditions for the possibility of rational conversation —if one is seriously arguing that such a denial is war-

ranted. It is likewise a performative contradiction to offer a thesis that *implies* the negation of one of these enabling conditions.

I might say that I'm shocked at how often philosophers are guilty of this logical sin, but I used to unwittingly make the same kind of mistake.

The most common example is perhaps a "skeptical" theory of knowledge, typically built on the tacit assumption of indirect realism. This is the lazy man's Kant. He not only knows that he can't know. He somehow knows that *you* can't know. But he knows this because he has *taken for granted* the massive ontological thesis that people are trapped in bubbles of consciousness. And therefore primordially alienated from a reality that may not even be out there. What smells like epistemic humility here is an accidental ontological arrogance. I used to fall for this one, and I've seen plenty of bright people do so. That "epistemic humility" is seductive.

We now move from the epistemically humble to the cynical. "It's all just sophistry" is of course itself just sophistry. Nietzsche does this kind of thing, perhaps as a rhetorical device or perhaps out of genuine naivety. But the problem is simple. The no belief is genuinely warrant cannot itself be genuinely warranted. We might call this mistake "*cynical* mysticism."

Just as the ineffable mystic can beat the forum by avoiding the pretense of rationality altogether, so can the cynical mystic refuse to waste time on a logic that

has been jettisoned. Another approach might go like this: “*I* know that it’s all sophistry, but I can use *your* naivety against you. ” Our cynical mystic, if prudent, won’t say this out loud, but they can use it to maintain the coherence of their identity. This “cynicism” need not be malicious, and it may indeed be *benevolently* “mystical.” The cynical mystic is of course a first-class realist in a deeper sense of the word.

Speaking as a former cynical mystic, influenced by Nietzsche and pragmatism, I now see it largely in terms of an unwitting psychologism. I had conversations for years with a person who was both an ineffable mystic and a cynical mystic. He was an ineffable mystic because he always hinted at a trans-rational knowledge available through various spiritual traditions. He was a cynical mystic because he “argued” against those he couldn’t convince by “diagnosing” them with fear of religion, being creatures of their materialistic age, and so on.

This is a common tactic on philosophy forums. If they aren’t convinced, the problem is on their side. So instead of really hearing criticisms, one looks for a personal fault. One treats the other as a faulty, while insisting on one’s own *free* rationality.

I *speculate* that the tendency of irrationalist spiritual types to go for idealism has contributed to the neglect of phenomenism as a viable explication of reality. “Grandpa” Berkeley *was* a theist. His motives weren’t pure. On the other hand, Mach has solid secular credentials. So I also *speculate* that there’s a different kind of bias on the other side.

I should share what I think is the least digestible bit of an updated phenomenalism. What do we make of objects that existed before “consciousness” ? Or do I deny that there *was* a before consciousness ?

I like the question, but the framing is questionable. For me there is no such thing as consciousness. But one can and should ask about *how* objects existed before the creatures we *associate* with torrents were here. In other words, what do we make of Meillassoux and his “ancestral events” ?

I throw the challenge of the ancestral event back at Meillassoux. What does it *mean* to say that such an event occurred ? What does it *mean* to say *there was* an “arche-fossil” ?

One meaning that I can give is that such a fossil would play an inferential role in the set of our beliefs. A certain item would have caused X, Y, Z. Finally an observation would be predicted. That kind of thing. A more intuitively obvious meaning: *If* one could go back in a time machine, one would perceive X,Y,Z.

The problem with “things in themselves” has always been the paradoxical emptiness of the concept. To say they “cause” representative “perceptions” is of course to bring them into the causal-inferential nexus. They fail their purpose, since they are now clearly things-for-us, a kind of confused quasi-physics. I think we can and already do integrate fossils like this into the rest of our lifeworld.

How would Mill understand objects that once existed but are no longer directly available ? I imagine he

would give a reply similar to the one above. If such an object existed, we'd expect to find the consequences *today* (or maybe eventually) as "possibilities of perception."

Now for something fun. Does the chair exist when no one is looking at it ? For Mill, it exists in the first place as an enduring possibility of perception. It's not logically impossible that a strange chair would disappear for 10 minutes and stay put for 10 minutes alternately. We've have to work out the details through experiment.

Perhaps now's the time to emphasize that I agree with Wittgenstein that "causality" is a "projection." The "laws" of nature are expressions of what we *expect* to happen. Consider the magical chair above. We'd observe, postulate a pattern, look for violations, try to zero in on this pattern numerically, and so on. But the chair can always stop reappearing or stop disappearing. Or turn into a flower.

We live so much in possibility and expectation that I think it's important to emphasize something like the priority of intentional objects to empirical objects. Practically we are dominated by empirical objects, but we make sense of these empirical objects with signs that express expectation and relationship. These signs (or the concepts they signify) are of course objects too. Note that I still rule out pure conceptuality. You might say that concepts are something like the equivalence classes of signs. So the idea can be translated or move from one sign system (French) to

another (English.)

Why *bother* with this phenomenalism in the first place ? I won't pretend it's a practical endeavor. *Maybe* it could help scientists. But I wouldn't try to justify it that way.

I'll confess that some of my own motivation is artistic. Time shows by hiding. One aspect or moment occludes the others. The moments are moments of the same entity through the unifying idea of the object. So we have time and being beautifully related here. We have objects that are fundamentally infinite and always mostly hidden. At the same time we have genuine access to the objects. We don't have the hard problem of consciousness. We don't have the problem of truth, since belief is taken to be fundamental. We can understand rationality as the pursuit of warranted belief. We also understand perspective to go "all the way down" and yet we don't lose our shared world.

Another motivation is the reduction of cognitive dissonance. Why do some of us "resent" confusion in our basic concepts ? I went to school for math, and I continue to love math. But I couldn't help but to move toward more and more fundamental questions. To get to the bottom of anything you need a fundamental ontology. You end up asking : what is a thing in the first place ? You need to figure out what knowledge is, whether or not you are trapped in a subjective bubble, and so on.

While my fellow philosophers may understand this, I don't think we should expect much from practical peo-

ple. The “vulgar conception of science” is technology that works whether or not the user or victim expects it to. *Power* is knowledge. Or knowledge enough. *Satisfaction* is knowledge. Even (part-time) “rationalists” like myself don’t entirely escape this. What is it to be rational ? To satisfy certain norms, one might say. To obtain a satisfying clarity. To maintain the comfortable coherence of one’s beliefs. It seems to me that rationality is finally ethical, a way of holding self and others to certain standards. To be rational is to take the impersonal personally.

What about art ? Is it “good” of me to want on-tocubism to be beautiful ? To be digestible, friendly, delivered without a jargon intended to intimate and mystify ? I think good art and good philosophy are related.

What do I expect ? Not much really, but I hope someone ends up reading this and appreciating it. It’d be nice to talk with another “outsider” philosopher, who’d probably only want to talk if their own work was along the same lines. But really I’d enjoy discussing these ideas with anyone that finds them intriguing.

At the moment I’ve turned off comments on my YouTube videos, basically because I need to withdraw to work on other projects, having pretty much said what there is to say for now. But I leave my email below, available to those who took the time to read this paper:

blackfl0wers@tutanota.com

Note the zero in “flowers.” I reserve that email for

ontocubism. I may not check it every day. So please be patient if I don't respond immediately.