

Sacred Geography: Phenomenology and (Extra)Sensory Ecology



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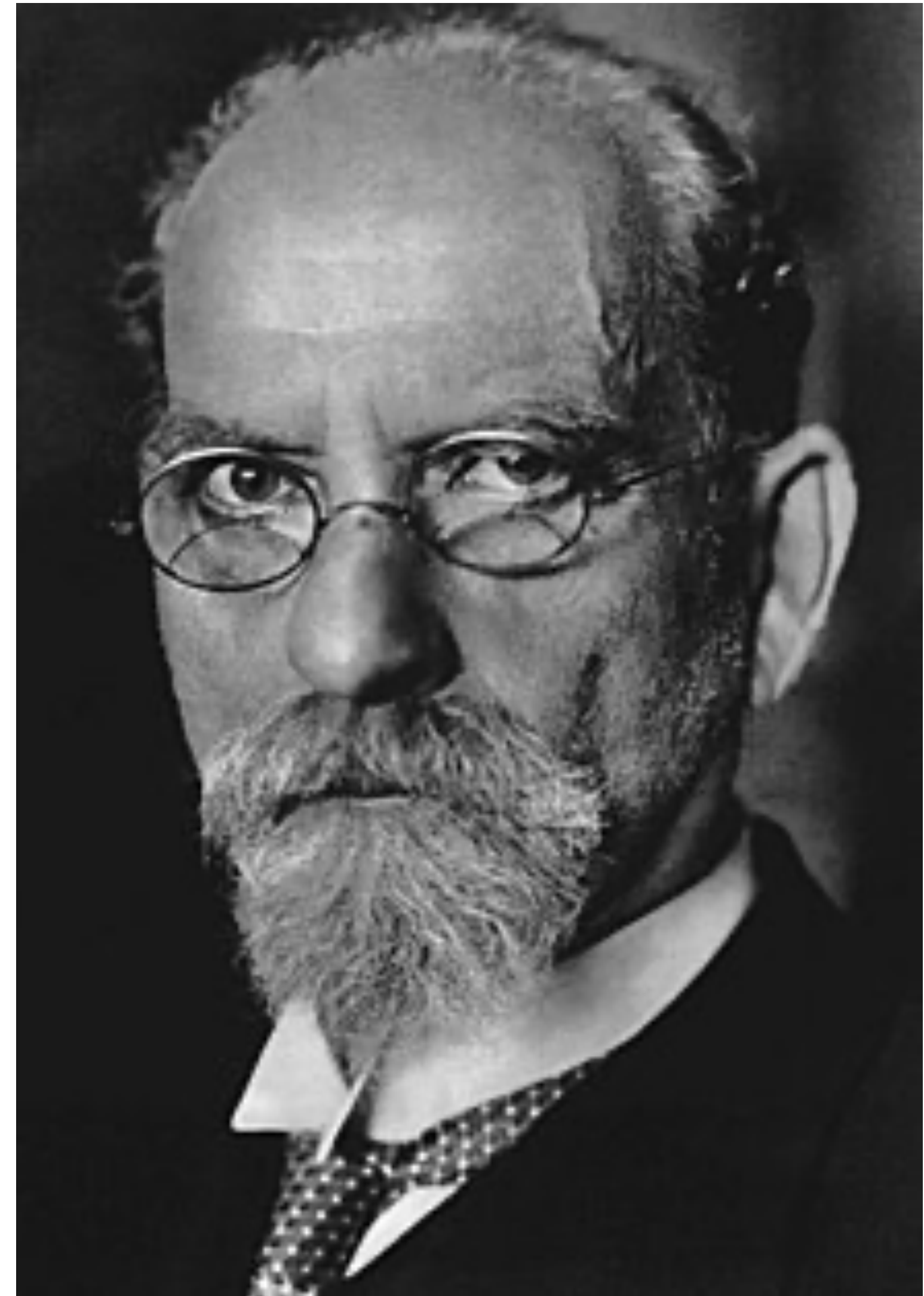
Overview

- Phenomenology.
- The ontological problem.
- Bracketing.
- Limitations of Bracketing.
- Sensory Ecology.
- Psychical Landscapes and Extrasensory Ecology.
- Methods.
- Recording Experience.
- Conclusions.

Phenomenology

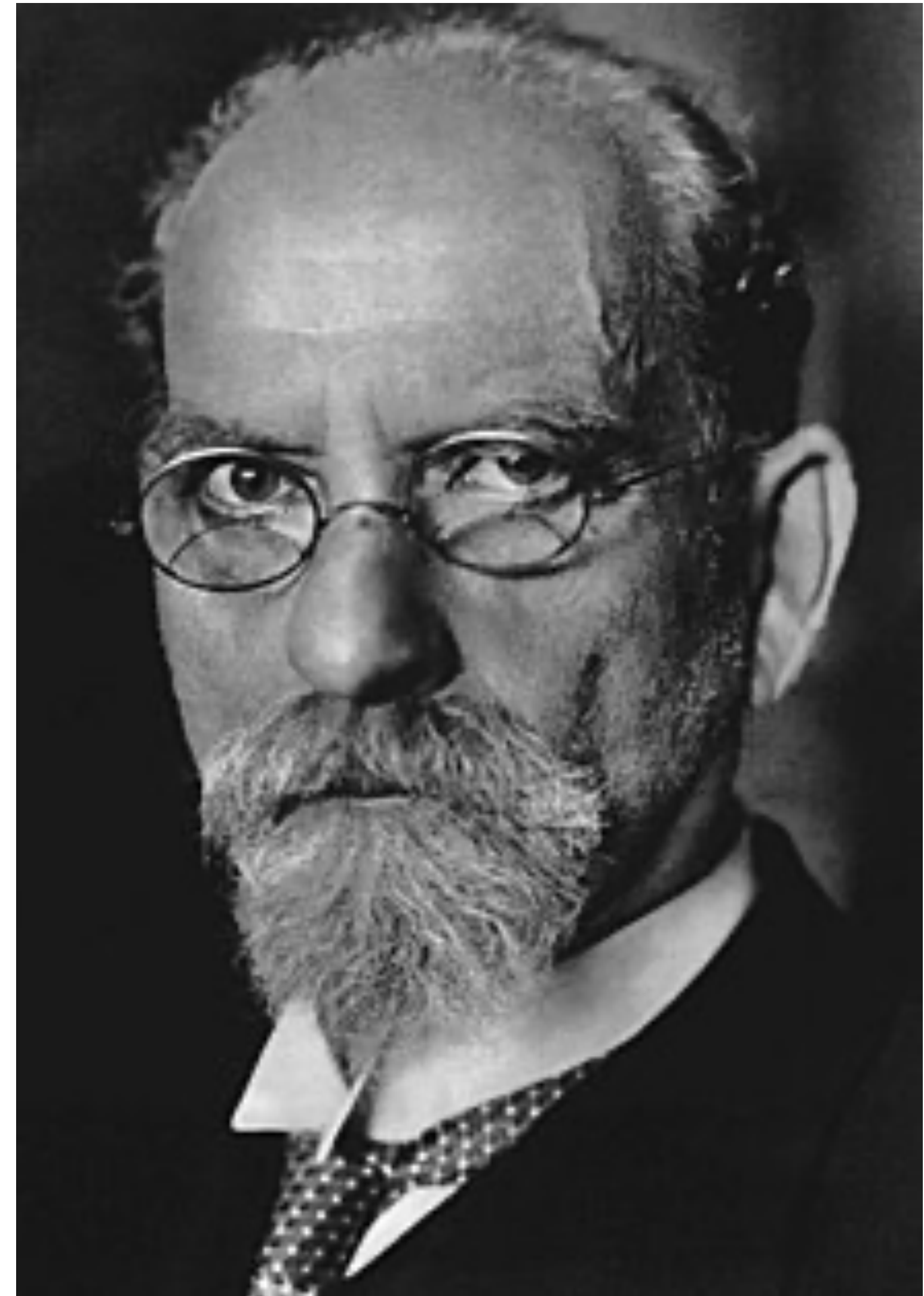
Phenomenology

- Developed by Edmund Husserl as an antidote to the increasing abstraction of 19th/20th century philosophy.
- The study of the structures of experience from the first-person perspective.
- The study of phenomena (things/events) as experienced.
- It is primarily a descriptive approach to understanding the world.
- Shift of focus towards embodiment and intention.



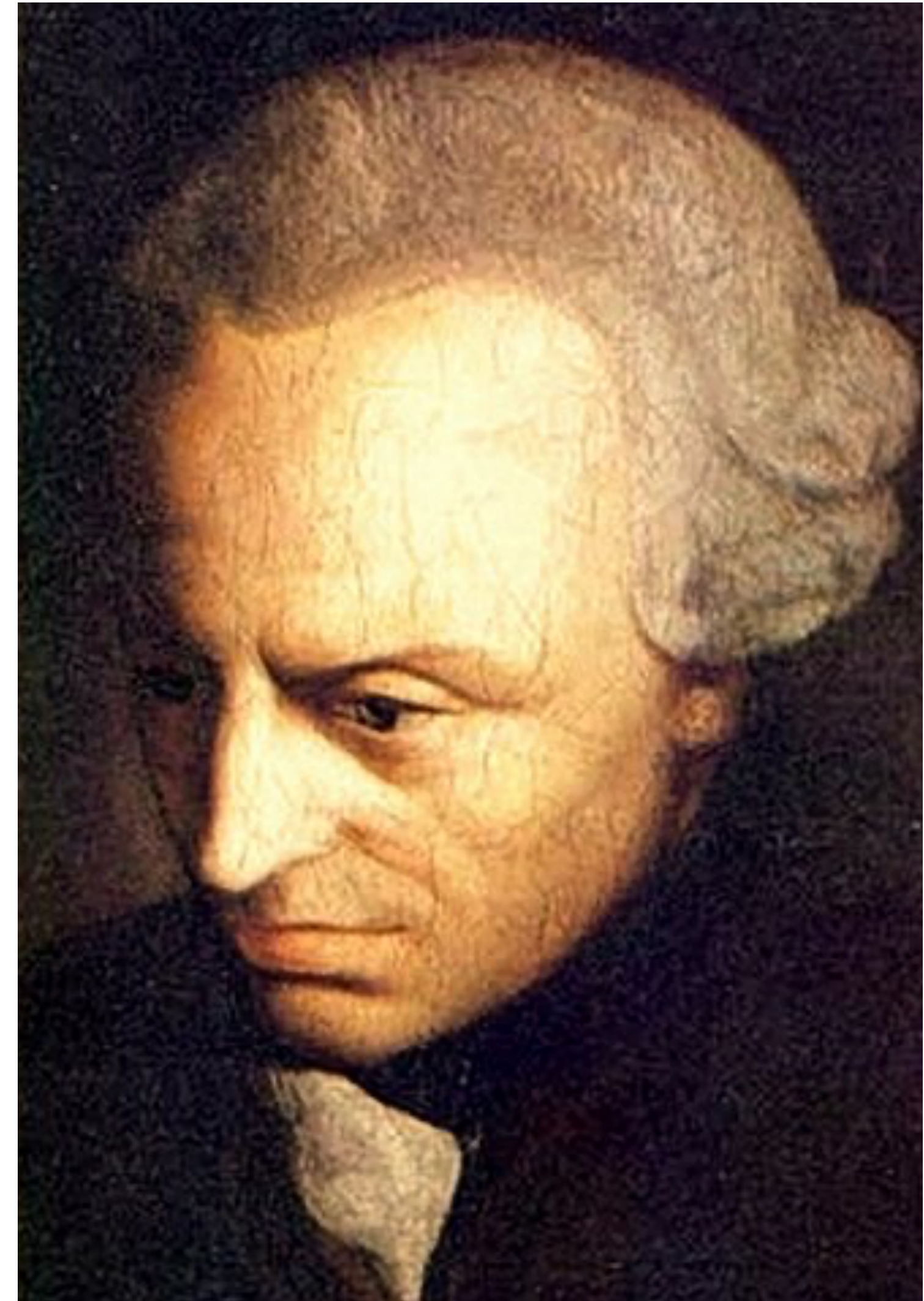
Life-World

- Return our attention to the ‘Life-World.’
- “The lifeworld is a realm of original self-evidences. That which is self-evidently given is, in perception, experienced as ‘the thing itself’, in immediate presence, or, in memory, remembered as the thing itself ...”
- “[It is] the world of straightforward intersubjective experiences [...] all the built-up levels of validity acquired by men for the world of their common life. [It is experienced] primarily through seeing, hearing etc., and [...] other modes of the ego [...]”
- “Thus we are concretely in the field of perception [...] and in the field of consciousness [...] through our living body...” (Husserl, 1970).
- Our experiences of the world can tell us something useful about the world.



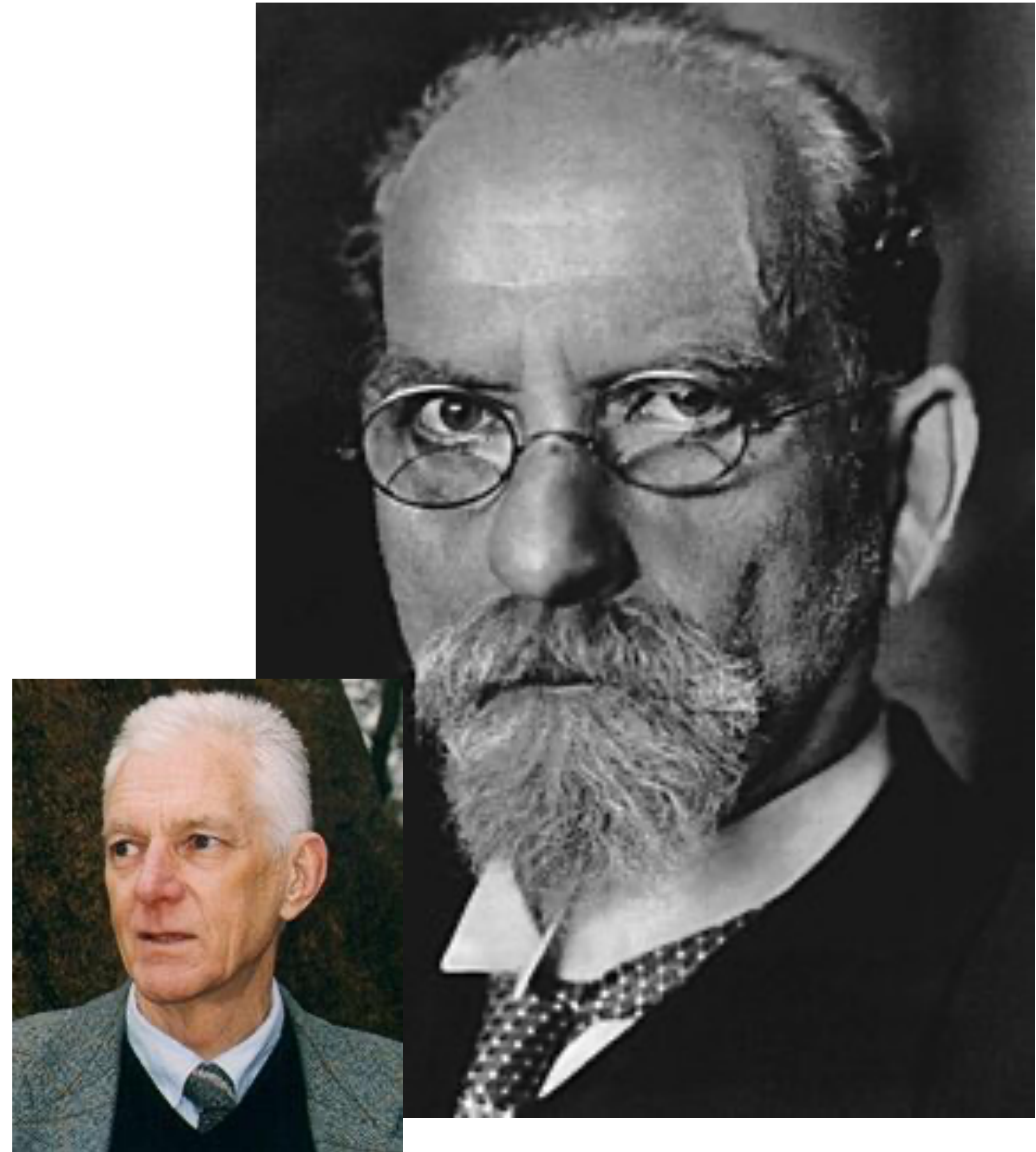
What are we experiencing?

- Ontological problem - what is the nature of that which we experience?
- Immanuel Kant identified two 'parts' of reality:
- **Phenomenal world** - the world as presented to our senses. How we experience it.
- **Noumenal world** - the 'real' world. We can never experience it directly, always mediated by the senses, cognitive categories, etc.



Bracketing

- Husserl proposes a cognitive/interpretive technique called 'bracketing' or 'epoché' to overcome the problem.
- This involves 'bracketing out' all presuppositions and questions from our descriptions of experience.
- Phenomenological approaches often opt to ignore the ontological question altogether.
- "The phenomenologist suspends inquiry into the hidden determinants of belief and action in order to describe the implications, intentions, and effects of what people say, do, and hold to be true" (Jackson, 1996, p. 11).



Bracketing in Social Science

- Bracketing out, or ignoring, issues related to the 'reality' (or otherwise), of a particular phenomenon has become a central feature of social science approaches.
- “As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case [the anthropologist] cannot take the question into consideration.”
(Evans-Pritchard, 1972, p. 17).
- Reduces experience to belief - leads to a form of relativism.



Limitations of Bracketing

- Sociologist Jeremy Northcote argues that ontological bracketing has serious limitations, especially when it comes to matters of religion/spirituality/magic/paranormal:
- “I hold that there is a fundamental bias in bracketing approaches that arises from the fact that an analyst taking such an approach must inevitably make a decision about where to place the ‘brackets,’ and hence define some aspects of supernormal belief or activity as being social in nature and the remainder as not, which is itself an ontological claim” (Northcote, 2004).
- Brackets are not neutral.



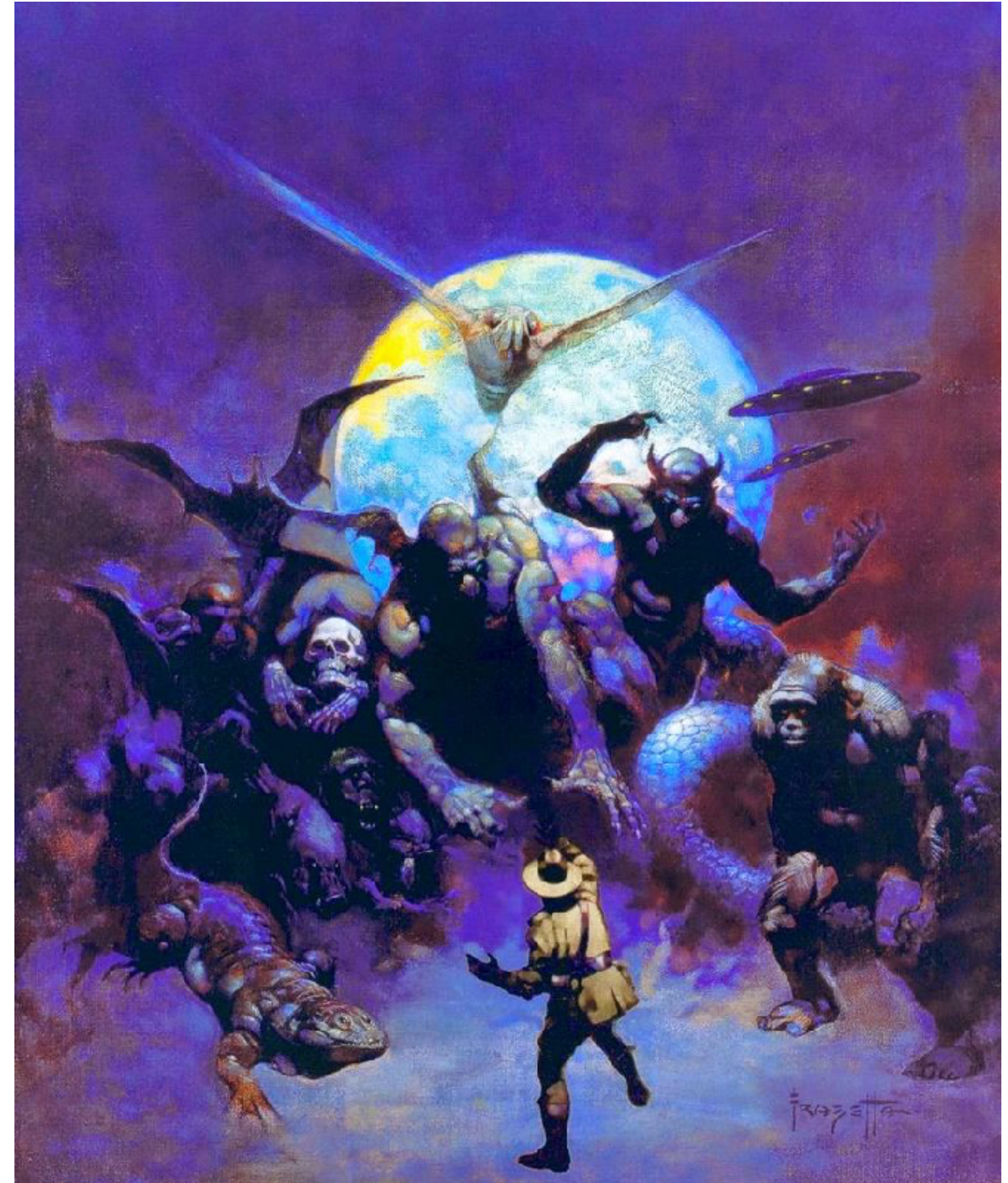
Limitations of Bracketing

- “Left to itself [phenomenology] is inadequate in providing a full understanding of how the transcendent and the cultural come together in identifying the presence of the holy, failing to address theological and sociological dimensions of that reality” (Lane, 2002, p. 44).
- Experience does not exist in isolation, and is informed by our personal worldview/cosmology/beliefs/culture/social background, etc...
- Experience also occurs in connection with the world, so should we really not ask questions about the nature of the world?



Ontological Flooding

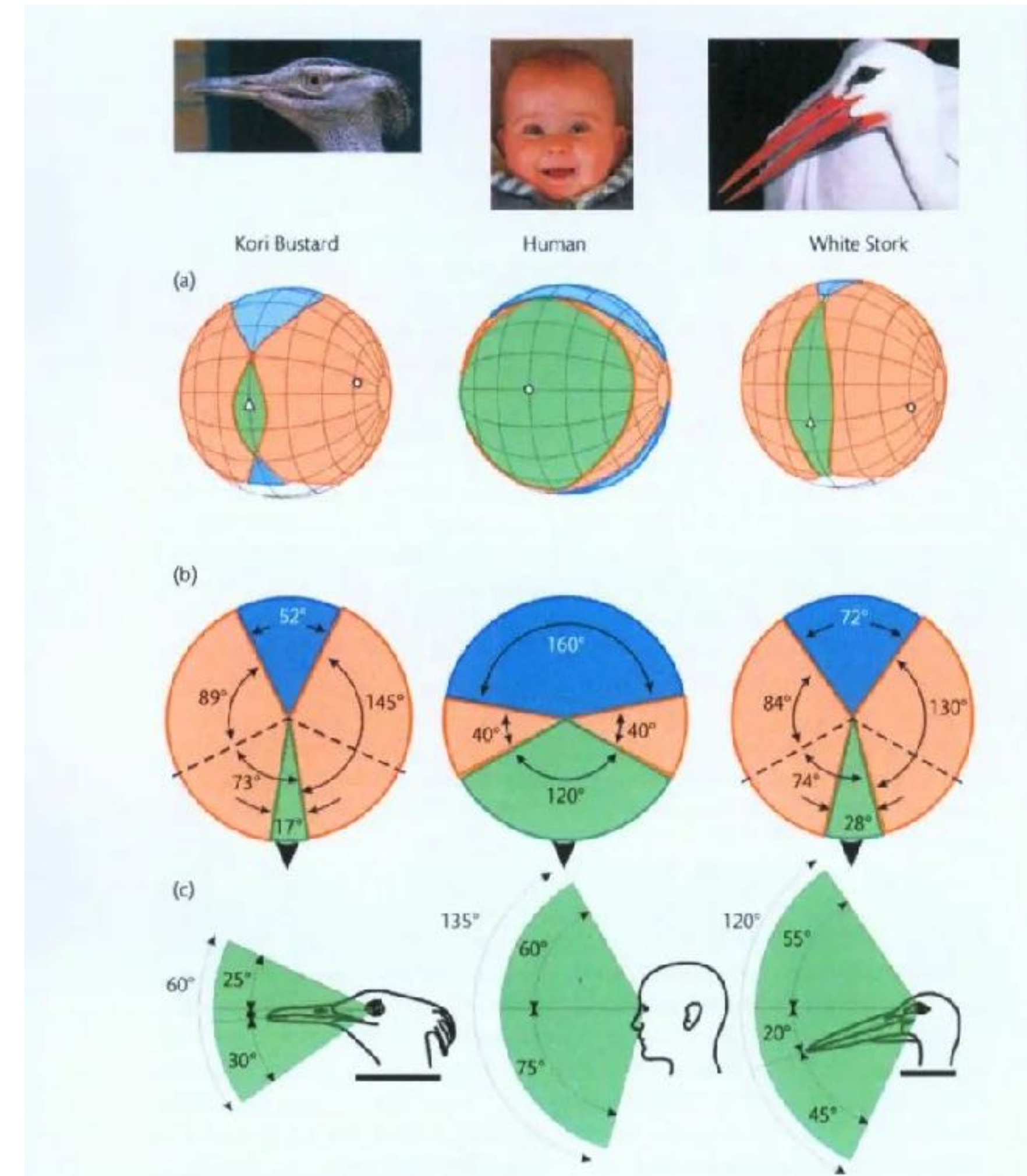
- Bracketing is like putting up a barrier to hold back possibilities.
- If we can remove the barriers then we can open ourselves up to a much wider range of possibilities.
- Emphasises complexity, multiple-contributing factors in any phenomenon, and multiple ways of interpreting and making sense of phenomena and experiences.
- The more different models/theories/perspectives we have the more nuanced our understanding becomes.



Attending to Experience

Sensory Ecology

- “Every organism inhabits a world that is the sum total of all the information being received and processed by that organism's nervous system [...] The term *umwelt* was coined to describe this perceptual world by Jakob von Uexküll in 1909 [...] This *umwelt* differs for each organism, which means that it is difficult for us to truly understand how another organism perceives the world” (Burnett, 2011).
- Recognised in anthropology and indigenous traditions, e.g. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro on Amerindian Perspectivism (2006).
- Also recognised in philosophy, e.g. Thomas Nagel on ‘What it is like to be a bat.’



What is it like to be a bat?

- In 1974 philosopher Thomas Nagel published an influential paper in the philosophy of mind asking the question ‘What is it like to be a bat?’
- “...most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. We must consider whether any method will permit us to extrapolate to the inner life of the bat from our own case, and if not, what alternative methods there may be for understanding the notion” (Nagel, 1974, p. 438).
- There is something that it feels like to exist.
- What is it like to be a....



Sensory Modalities

Sensory modality	Example senses
Vibration	Hearing, vibration detection
Body movement	Equilibrium (balance)
Physical contact	Touch
Chemicals	Smell, taste, pheromone detectors
Electromagnetic energy	Vision, electric field detection, magnetic field detection
Temperature	Heat "vision," temperature detection
Table 1: Some examples of different sensory modalities. For each modality, some examples of sensory systems that use that modality are provided.	

(Burnett, 2011)

Psychical Landscapes

- Evans-Wentz:

“[...] from the first our interpretation of Environment is fundamentally psychical” (Evans-Wentz, 1911, p. 1).

- Tim Ingold:

“[...] I reject the division between inner and outer worlds - respectively of mind and matter, meaning and substance [...] The landscape, I hold, is not a picture in the imagination, surveyed by the mind's eye; nor [...] is it an alien and formless substrate awaiting the imposition of human order [...] Thus, neither is the landscape identical to nature, nor is it on the side of humanity against nature [...] it is with us, not against us” (Ingold, 1993, p. 154).

- We extend out into the landscapes, and the landscape extends into us - affecting our moods/emotions/feelings/experience.
- The ‘psychosphere.’
- ‘Extrasensory Ecology.’



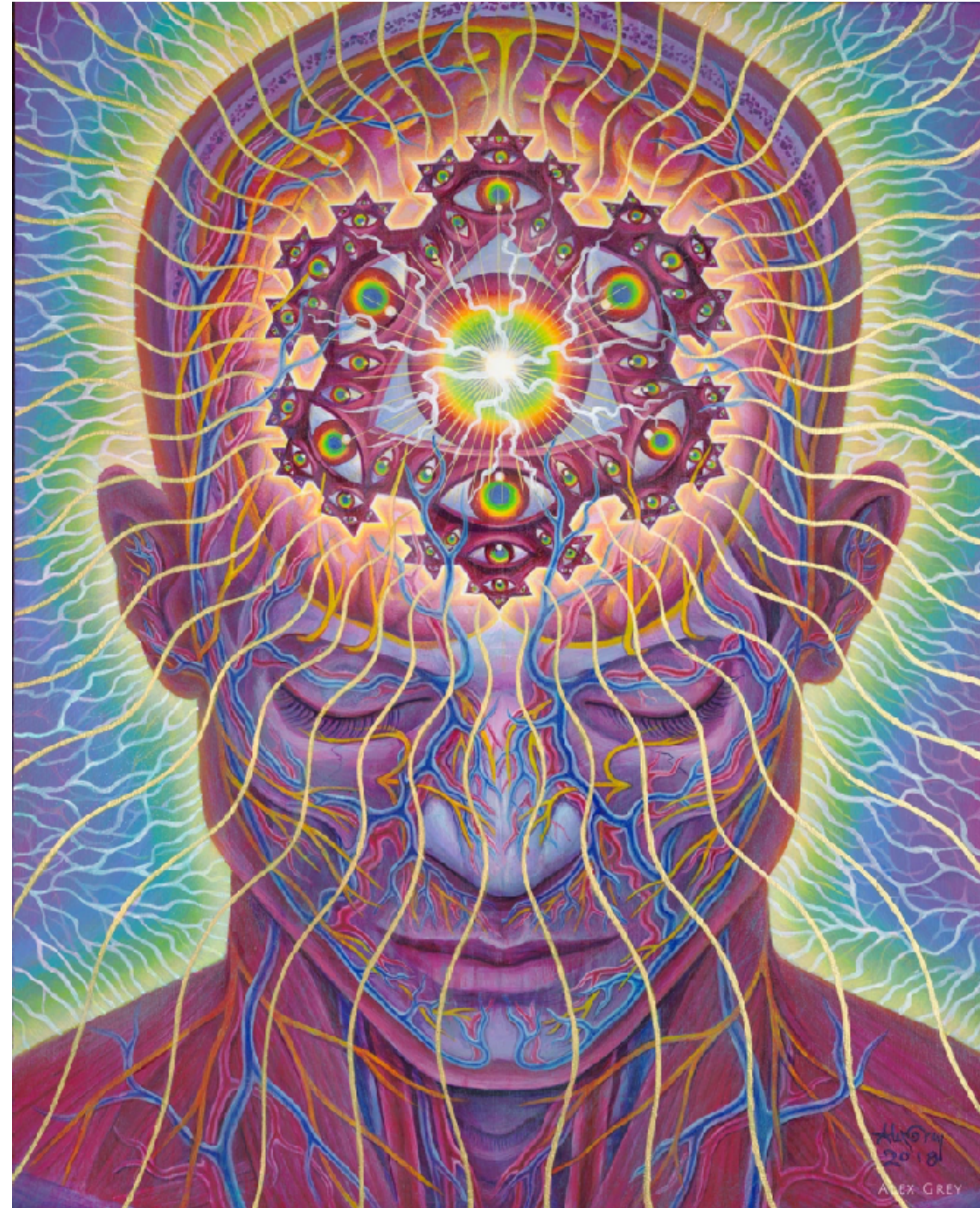
Extrasensory Perception (ESP)

- Term coined by the parapsychologist J.B. Rhine.
- “E.S.P. - Extra-Sensory Perception. Perception without the function of the recognised senses” (Rhine, 1935, p. xi).
- Other kinds of sensations that we might have in particular places.



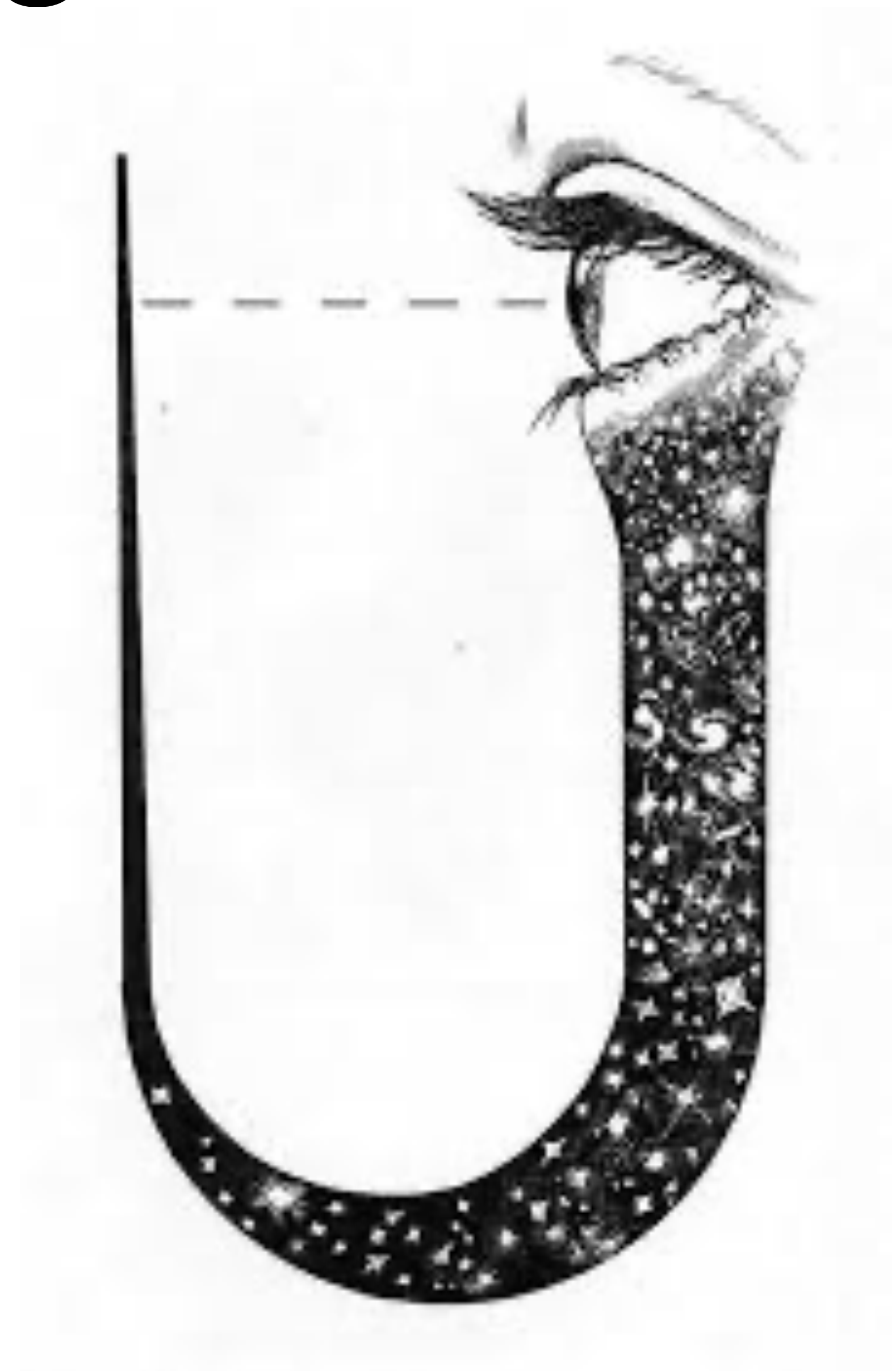
Extrasensory Modalities

- Vibes...
- Atmosphere...
- Subtle sensations...
- Sense of presence...
- Haunted...
- Telepathy...
- Clairvoyance...
- Visions...
- Intuitions...



Methods

- At least two approaches to conducting phenomenological research.
- 1) The collection and analysis of experiential narratives, e.g. interviews.
- 2) Autoethnographic approach, e.g. using your own body/sensations as a research tool.
- Then you can put phenomenological material into dialogue with theoretical literature.



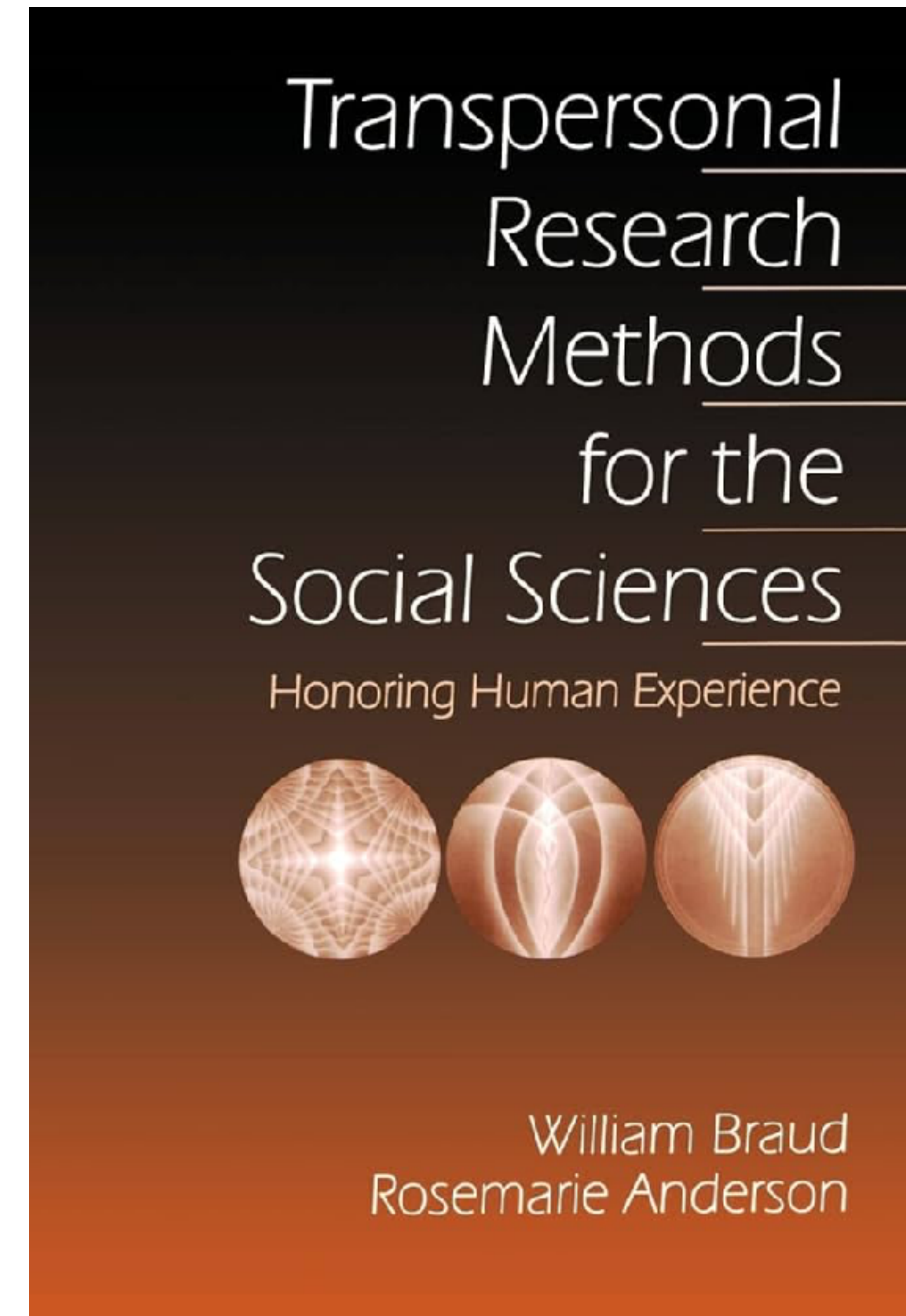
Recording Experience

- Audio/Field Recordings.
- Photography.
- Video.
- Artwork/Music.
- Written notes.
- Journaling/Diaries.
- Recording more than just the topographical/physical...



Transpersonal Methods

- **Integral Inquiry** - “The cornerstone of integral inquiry is the presentation of a continuum of qualitative and quantitative research methods, both conventional and avant-garde, from which researchers may choose (or blend) methods to best suit their research questions. Integral inquiry is then extended to include alternative forms of knowing (data collection), alternative ways of working with the data (analyzing data) and alternative ways of expressing findings (presenting results)” (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. 29).
- **Intuitive Inquiry** - “Intuitive inquiry uses transpersonal skills, such as intuition and alternative states of consciousness, as core methods of inquiry. Research investigations are enriched and expanded by applying transpersonal skills to every level of inquiry, including choosing a compelling research topic, collecting data from a wide variety of sources, incorporating the researcher’s insights, analyzing data through a variety of intuitive modalities” (p. 30).
- **Transpersonal Awareness** - “When the transpersonal presents itself in awareness, these experiences can be explored using empirical phenomenological research methods. [Common themes in descriptions of transpersonal experiences include] transcendent awareness manifesting through the vehicle of a given experience, intense emotional or passionate states, being in the present moment, transcendence of space and time, expansion of boundaries and sense of connectedness, stillness or peace, sense of knowing, unconditional love, feeling graced, ineffability, and self-transformation” (pp. 30-31).



Conclusions

- Phenomenology is about bringing experience to the centre stage.
- The concept of the 'life-world.'
- Bracketing and its limitations.
- Attend to the senses in sacred spaces.
- Consider the sensory ecologies of other inhabitants of the space, e.g. non-humans.
- Attend to the extrasensory in sacred spaces, e.g. what are the subtle/intuitive/emotional vibes?
- Experiment with different ways of recording field data, both objective and affective.

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