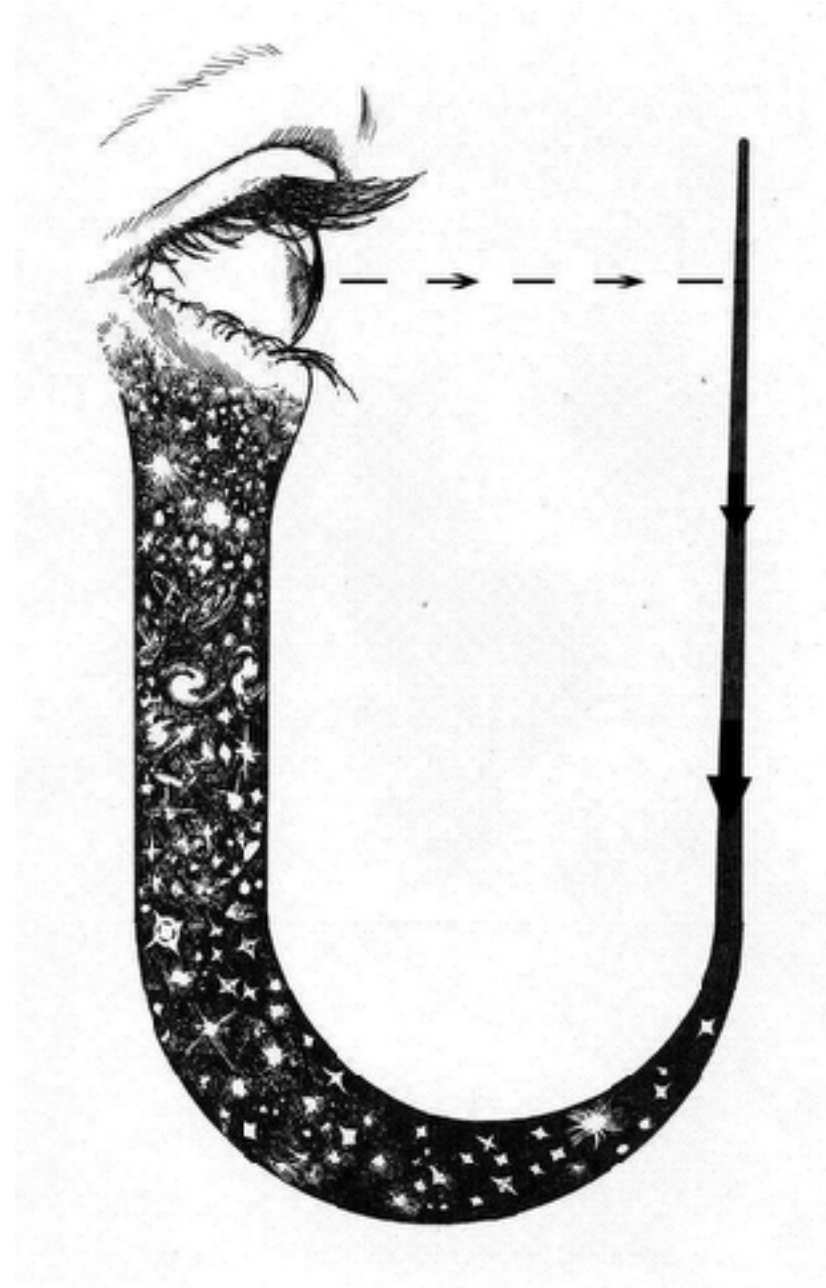
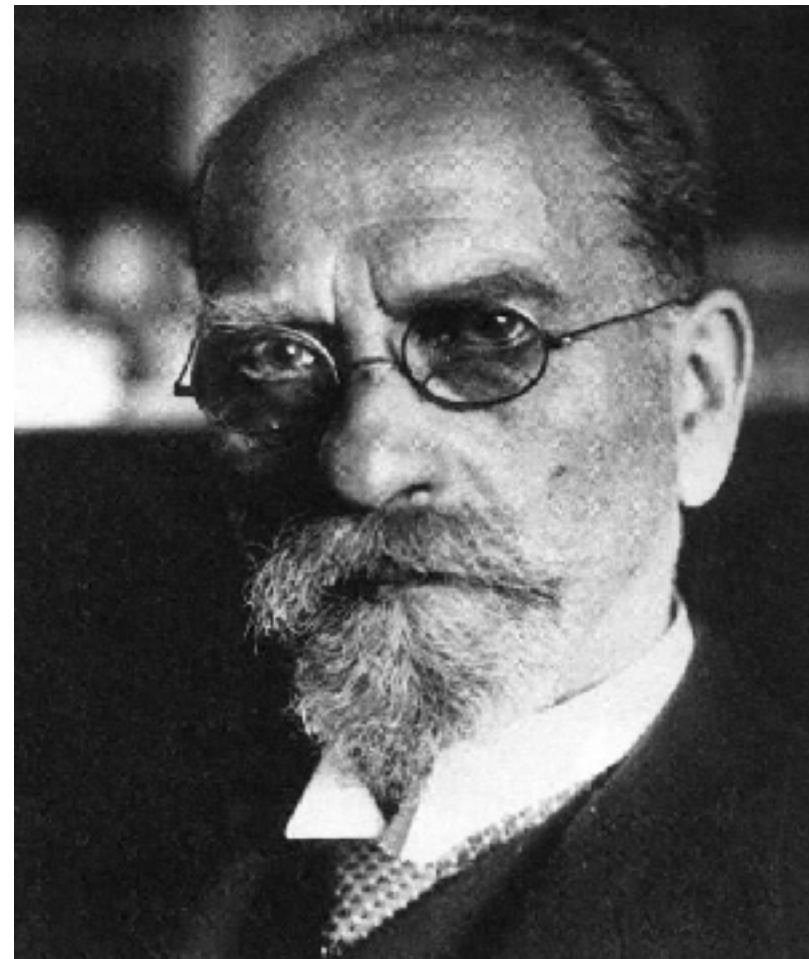


Researching Contemporary Cosmologies: Phenomenology in the Study of Extraordinary Experience

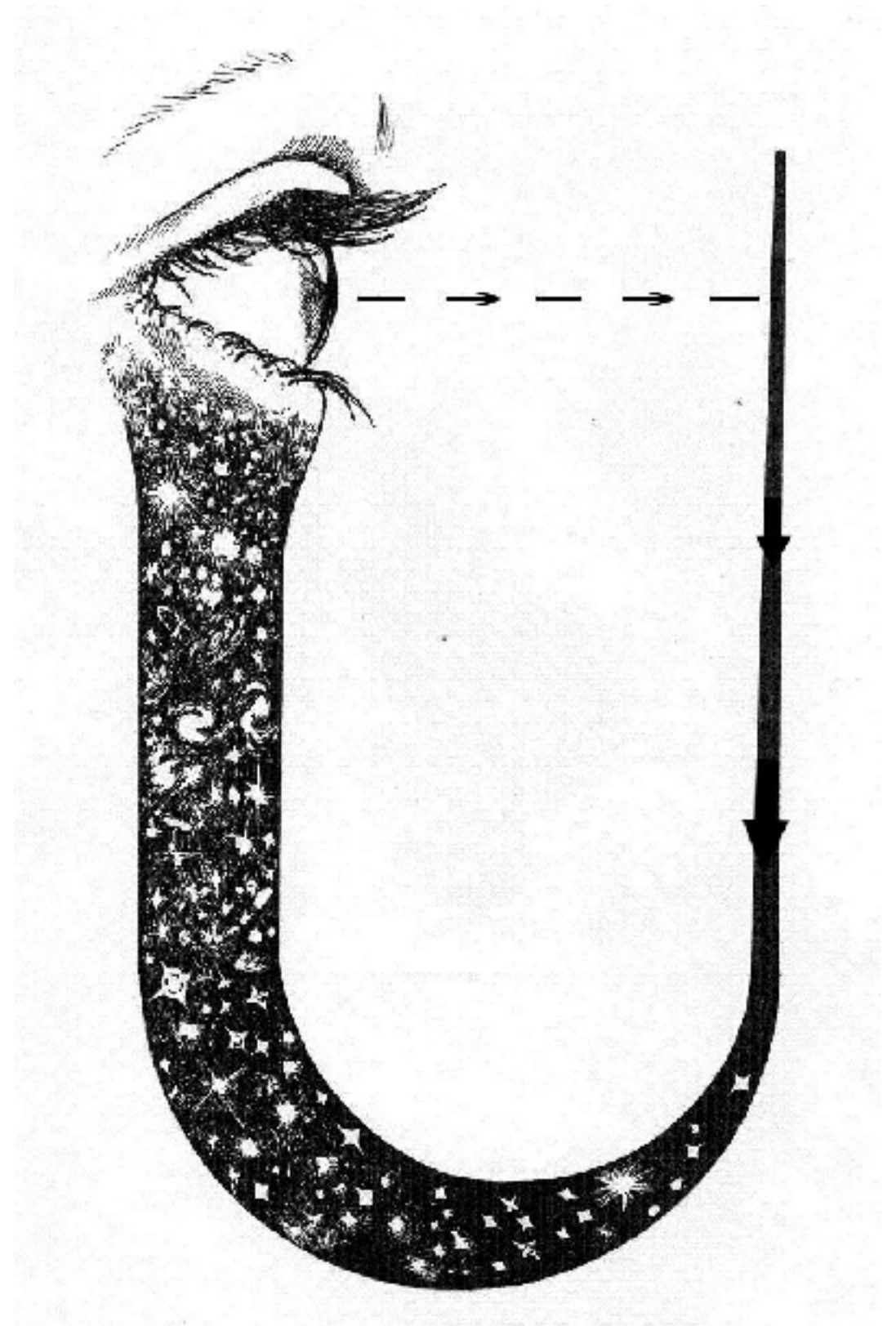


Overview

- What is phenomenology?
- Husserl, the lifeworld and epoche.
- Kant and the phenomenal and noumenal worlds.
- Experience-Centred Approach.
- Narrative Approach.
- Core experiences.
- Problems with narrative approaches.
- Beyond the Brackets.

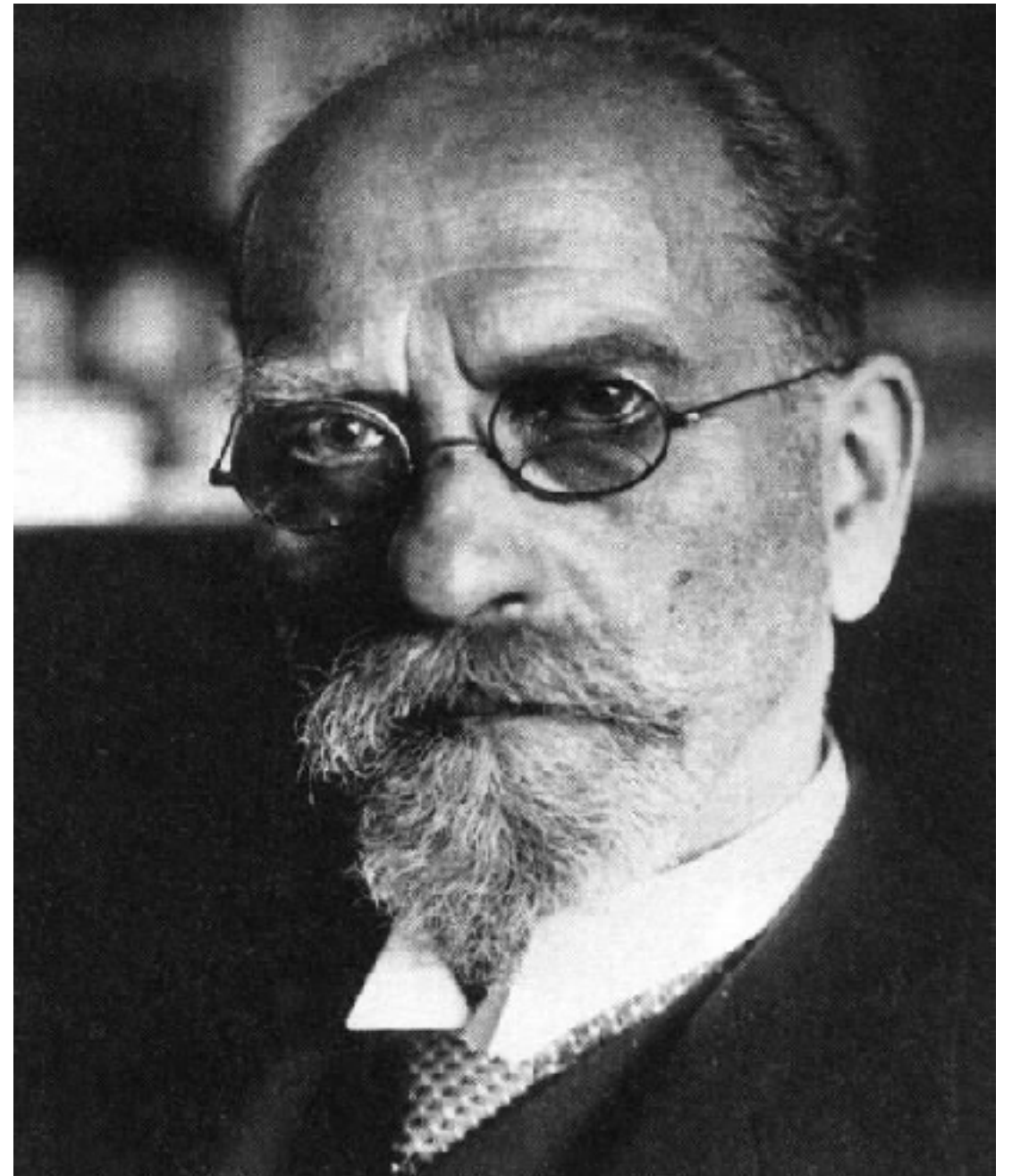
What is Phenomenology?

- The study of phenomena (things/events) as experienced.
- The study of the structures of experience from the first-person perspective.
- It is primarily a descriptive approach to understanding the world.



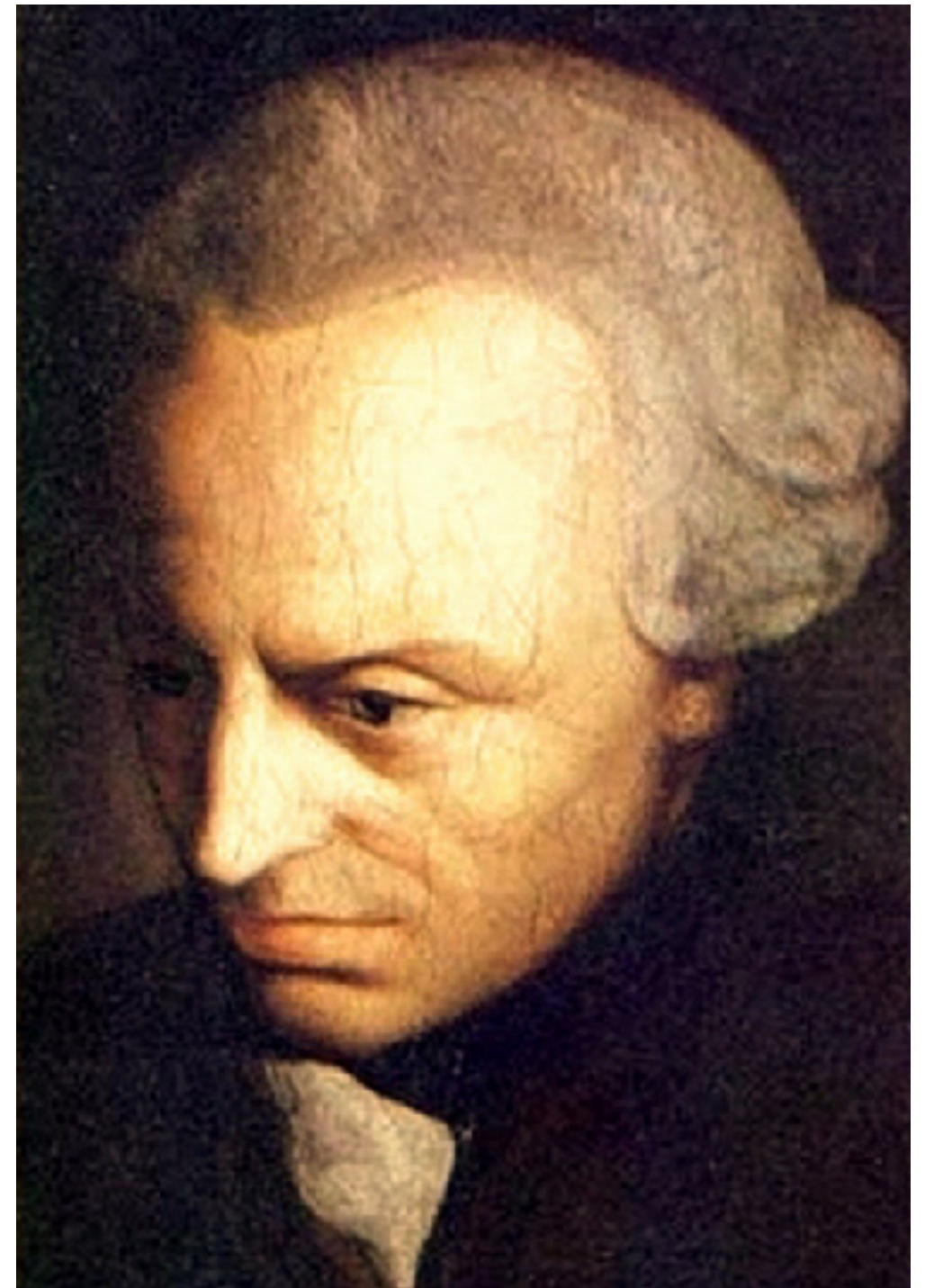
Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)

- Developed phenomenology as an antidote to the increasing abstraction of 19th/20th century philosophy.
- Shift of focus towards embodiment and intention.
- But there are problems with how we might go about achieving this.

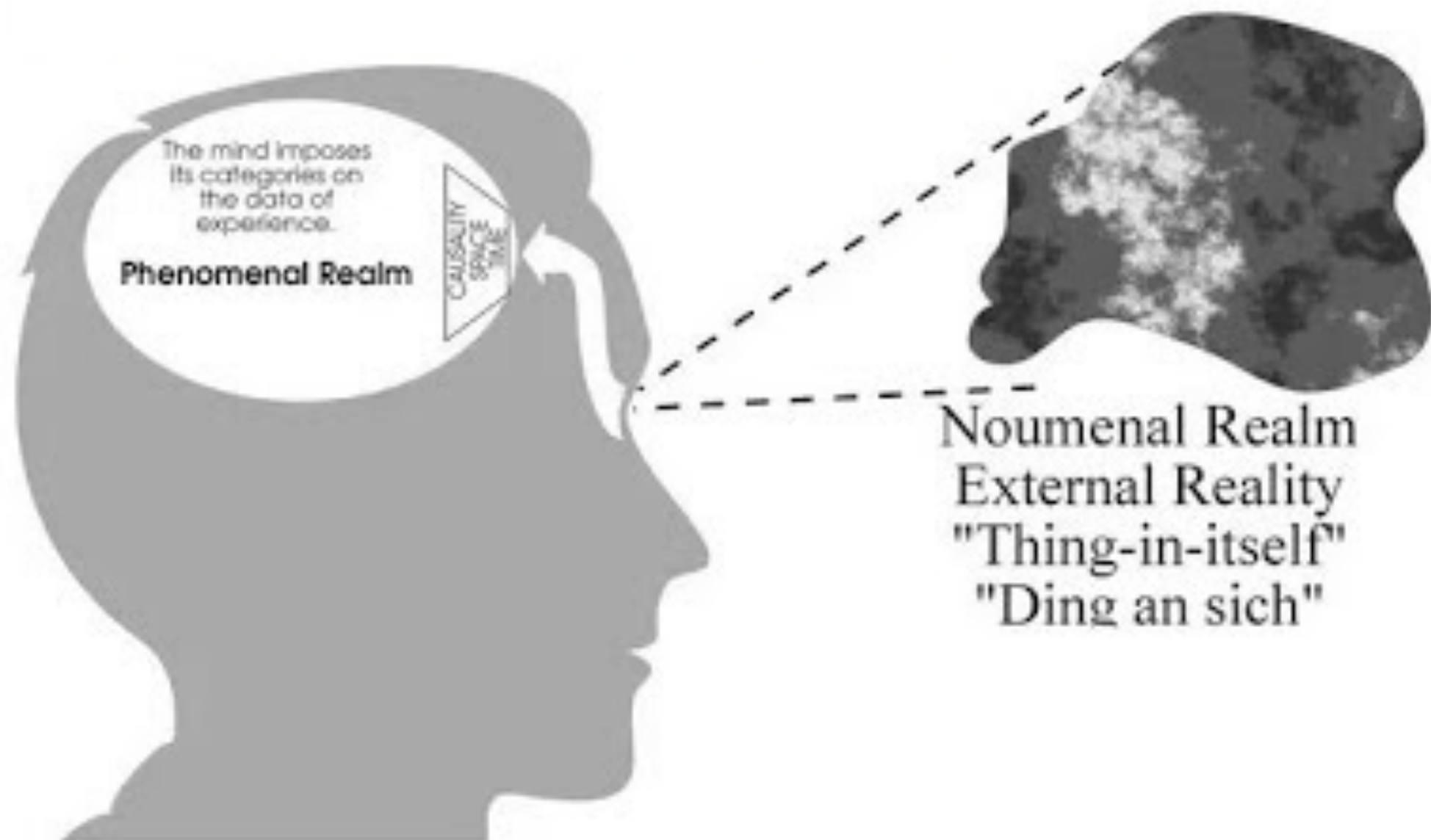


Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- Ontological problem - what is it that we are experiencing?
- 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.
- The **phenomenal** world is the world that we experience.

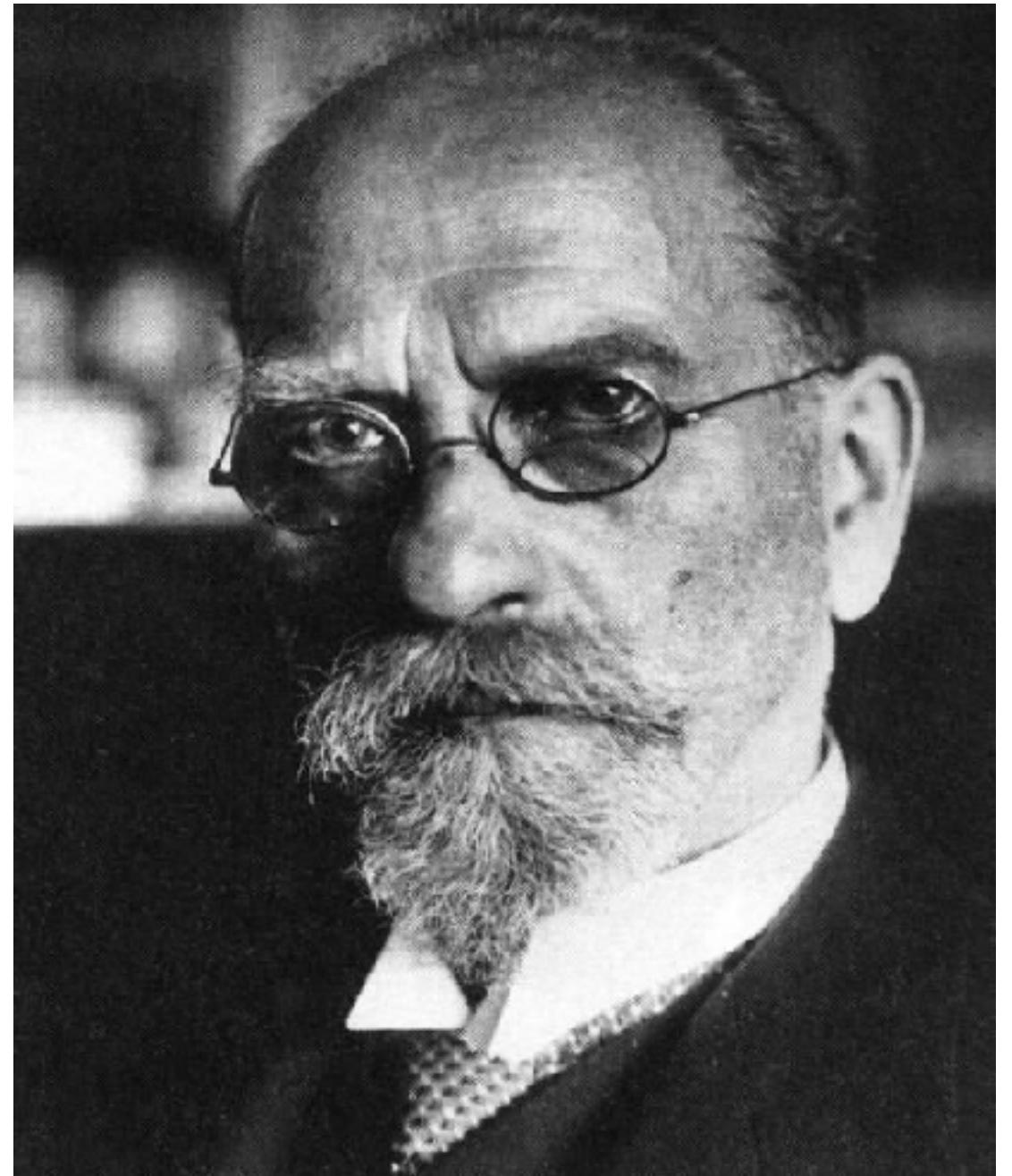


Can we experience reality?



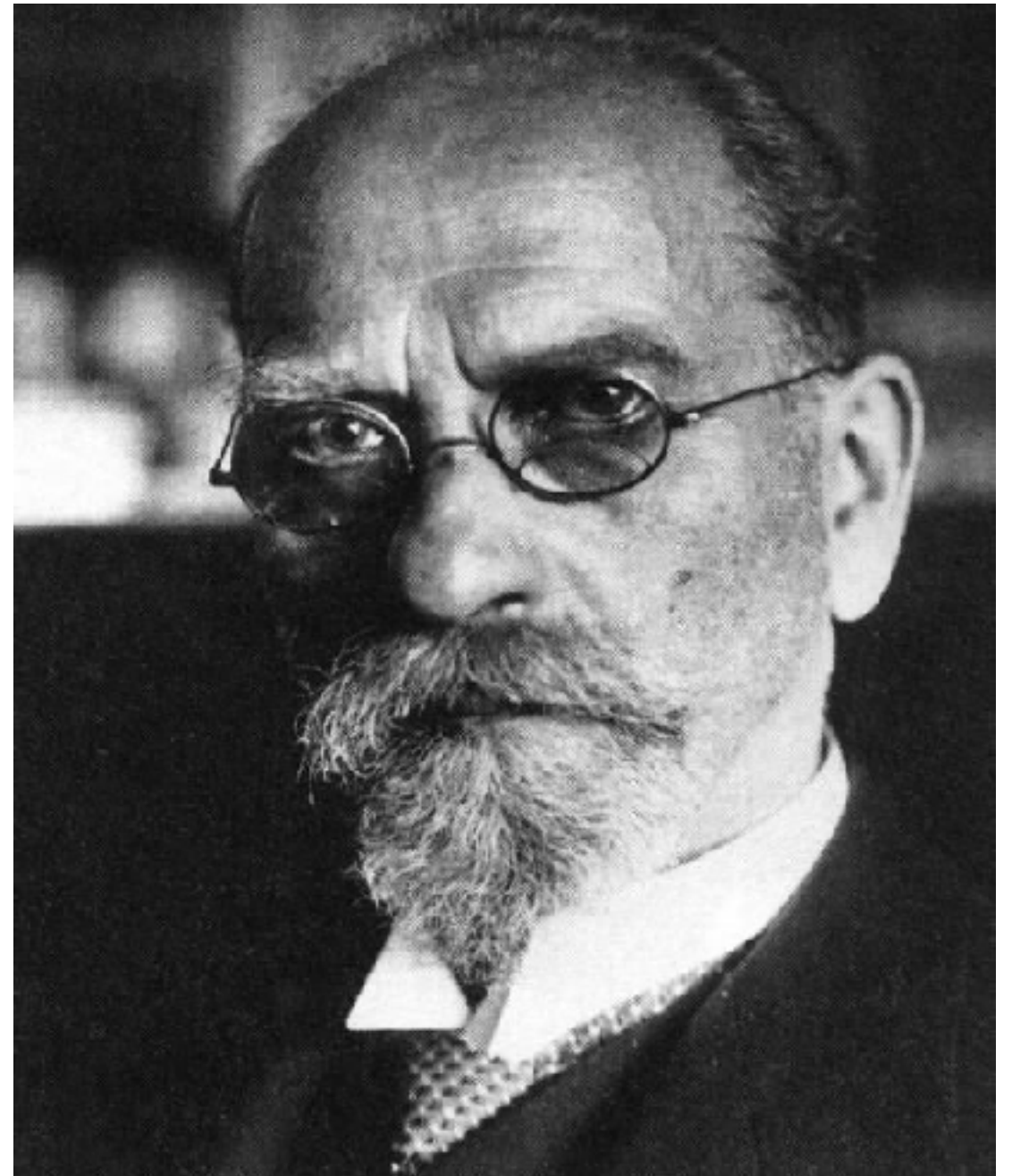
Life-world (*Lebenswelt*)

- “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).



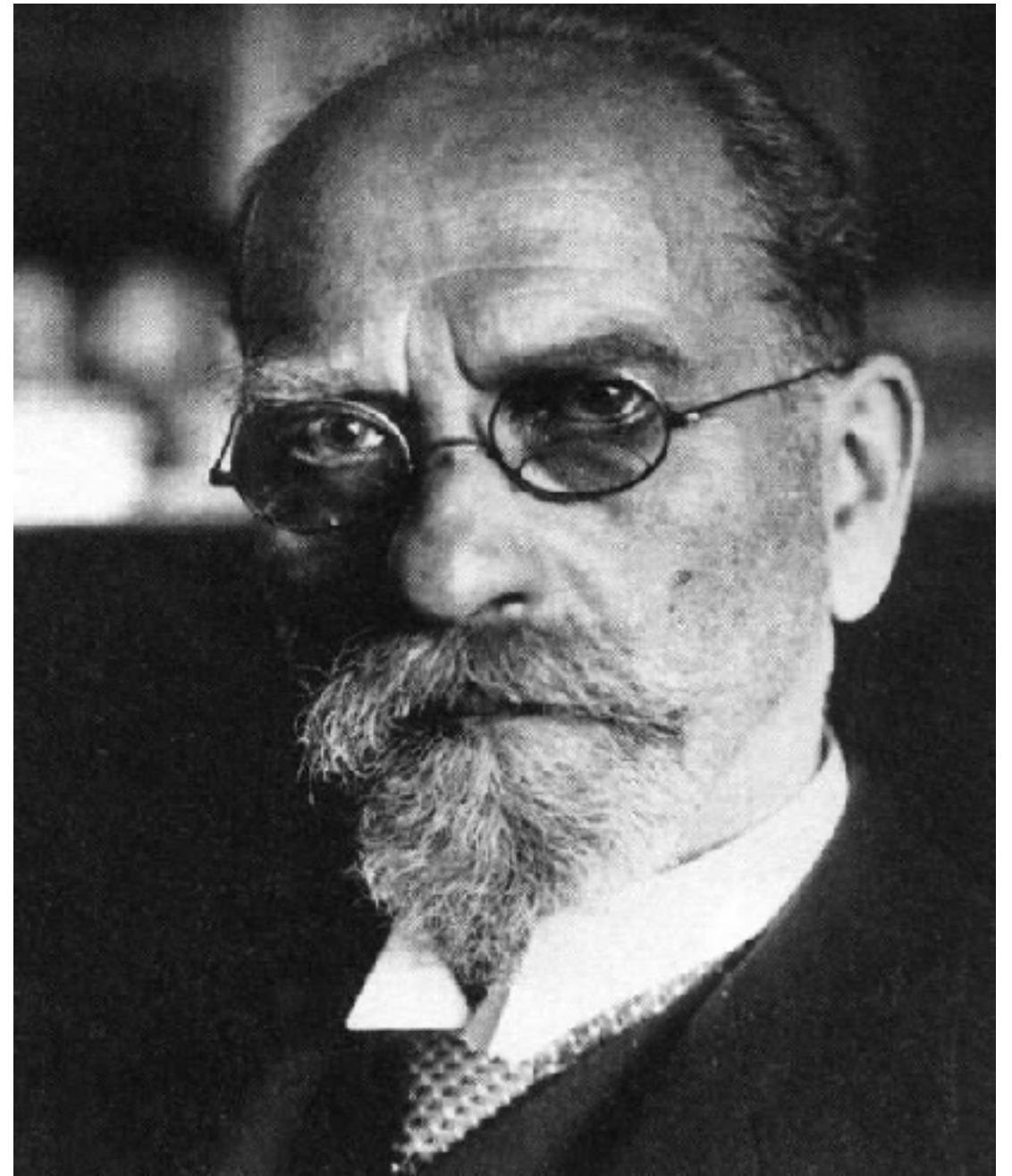
Life-world (*Lebenswelt*)

- The subject and the object are brought together in the concept of life-world.
- Breaks down the distinction between the observer and the object being observed.
- Consciousness is always 'of something' - it is a relationship with the world.



Bracketing (epoche)

- Husserl also proposes a technique called 'bracketing' or 'epoche' for phenomenological description.
- This involves 'bracketing out' all presuppositions and questions from our descriptions of experience - not asking whether it is 'real' or not, for example, but exploring the meaning of the experience to the experienter.
- 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)



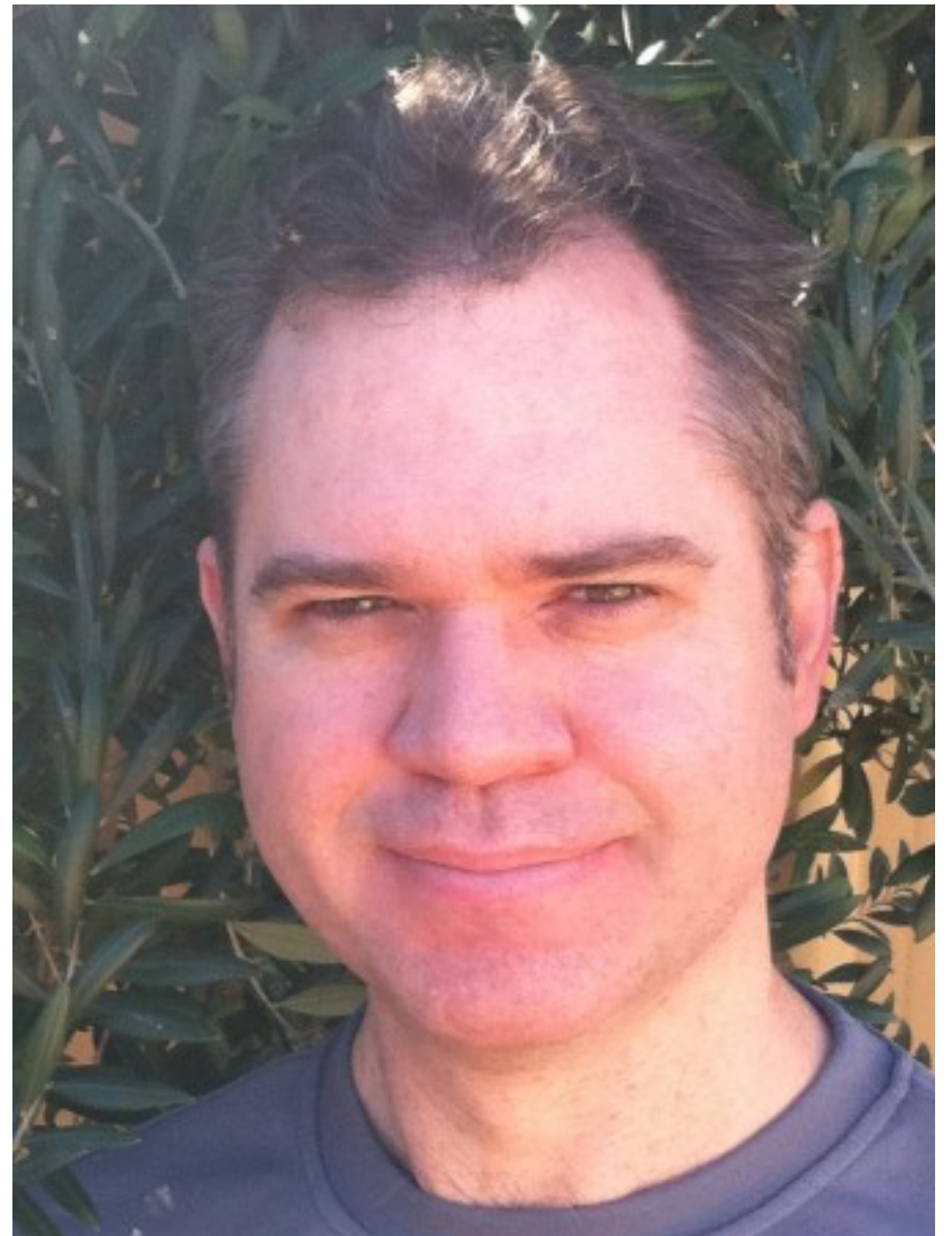
Bracketing (epoche)

- 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 culture and belief - leads to a form of relativism.



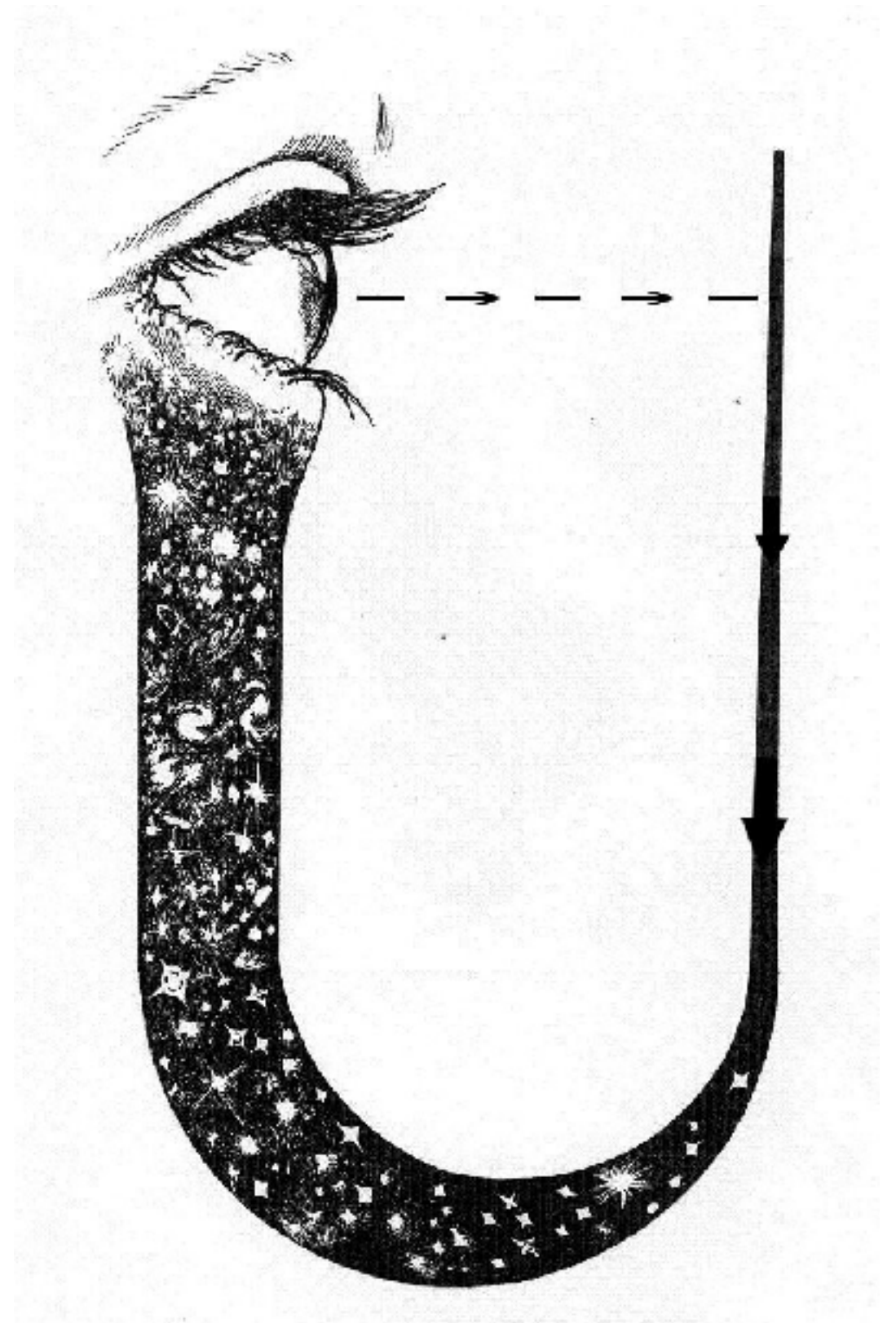
Limitations of Bracketing

- Sociologist Jeremy Northcote argues that ontological bracketing has serious limitations in the study of supernatural belief and paranormal experience.
- “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 supernatural belief or activity as being social in nature and the remainder as not, which is itself an ontological claim” (Northcote, 2004).



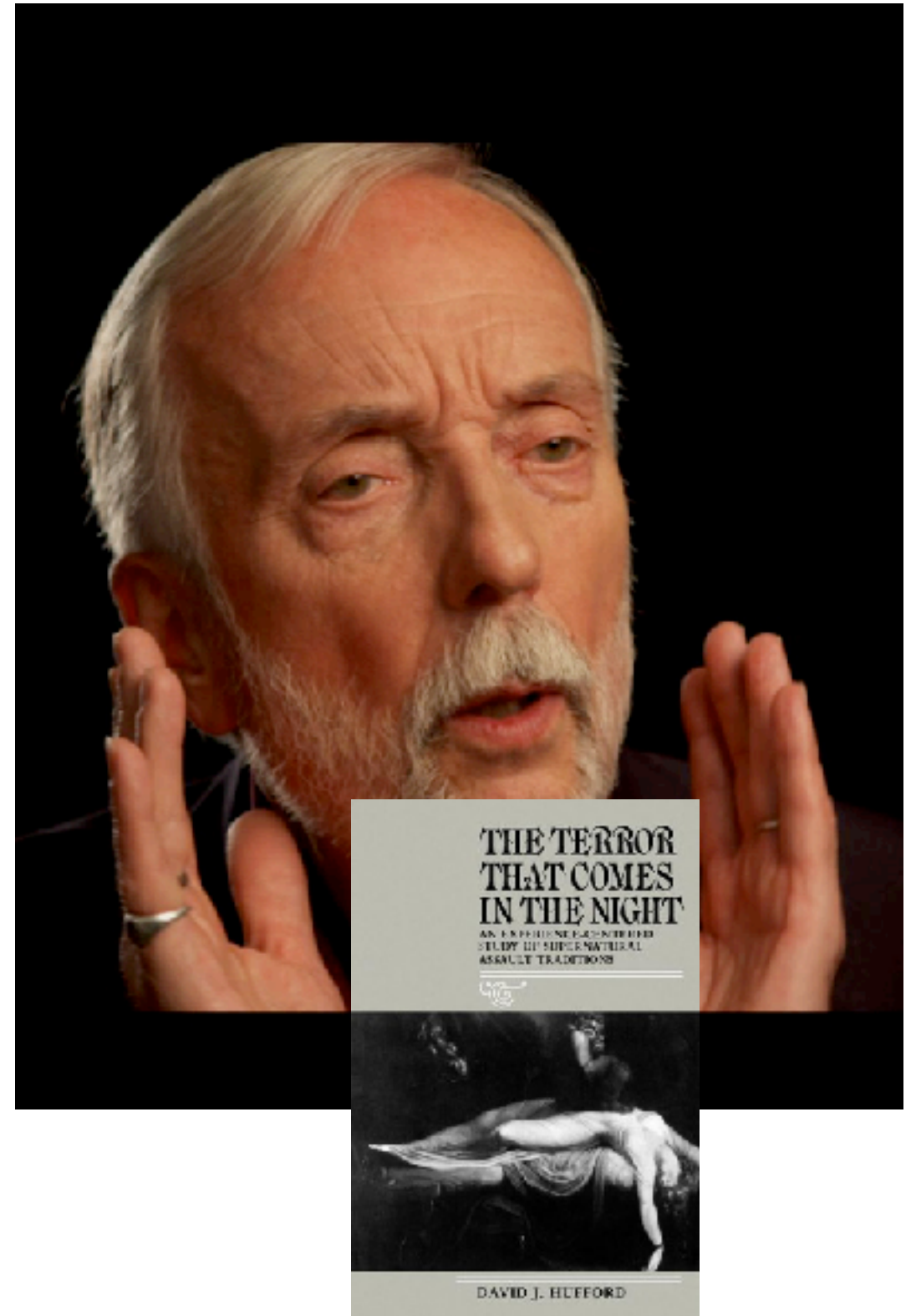
In the social sciences...

- Phenomenology is frequently used in one of two ways in the social sciences:
- In the form of ethnographic participant observation, and in autoethnography - e.g the incorporation of your own first-person experiential data into your research - this will be dealt with in a later lecture.
- In the form of analyses of collected phenomenological accounts.



Experience-Centred Approach

- David Hufford and the experiential source hypothesis.
- Holds that the Old Hag tradition “contains elements of experience that are independent of culture” (Hufford, 1982, p. 15).
- Certain parts are culturally derived, i.e. ‘Old Hag’ label and associated traditions, but that the experience is not.
- “The experiential hypothesis...predicts that first- and secondhand accounts might be common, depending on the frequency of the underlying experience” (Hufford, 1982, p. 16).
- “The primary theoretical statement of the [Experiential-Source Hypothesis] might be roughly summed up as follows: some significant portion of traditional supernatural belief is associated with accurate observations interpreted rationally. This does not suggest that all such belief has this association. Nor is this association taken as proof that the beliefs are true” (Hufford, 1982, p. xviii)



Narrative Approaches

- Hennink, Hutter & Bailey (2020):

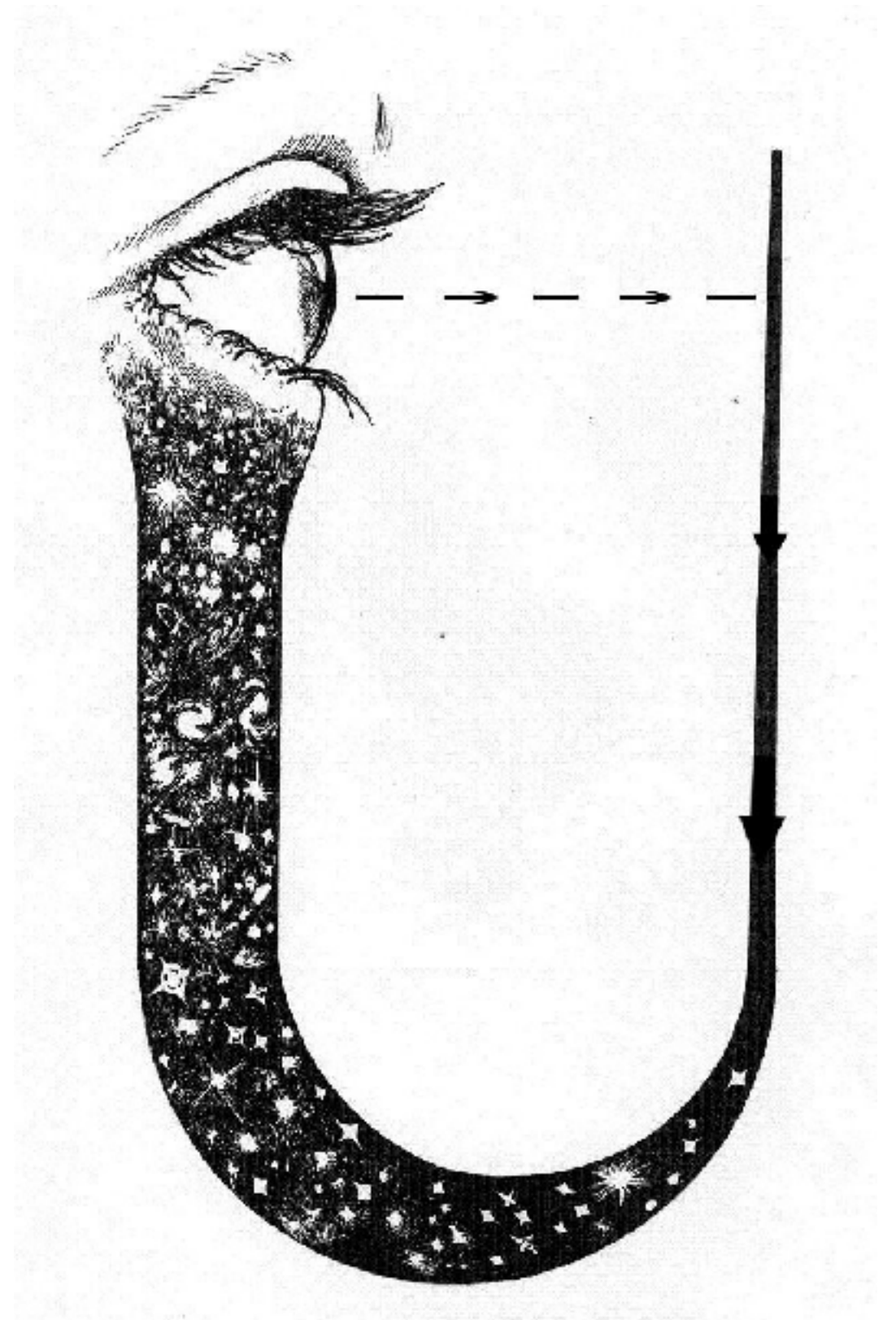
“A narrative is essentially a story that is depicted through an interview or document...Narrative analysis examines the nature of these stories to understand how people portray their lives and experiences” (p. 209).

- We can investigate the experience and beliefs by collecting narratives or **memorates** (e.g. through interviews).
- Hufford defines the term ‘memorate’ simply as “a story told as personal experience and believed to be true” (Hufford, 1982, p. 15).
- A means of examining the phenomenological features of particular traditions of belief.
- Gillian Bennett’s study of the supernatural beliefs of British women: “The supernatural traditions I found were not the ones I expected: the research showed up areas of belief that I was not previously aware existed...The beliefs discussed and the stories told to me were often very far from what I expected. But then they were stories told from personal experience, not learned from books” (Bennett, 1987, pp. 16-17).



Looking for Patterns

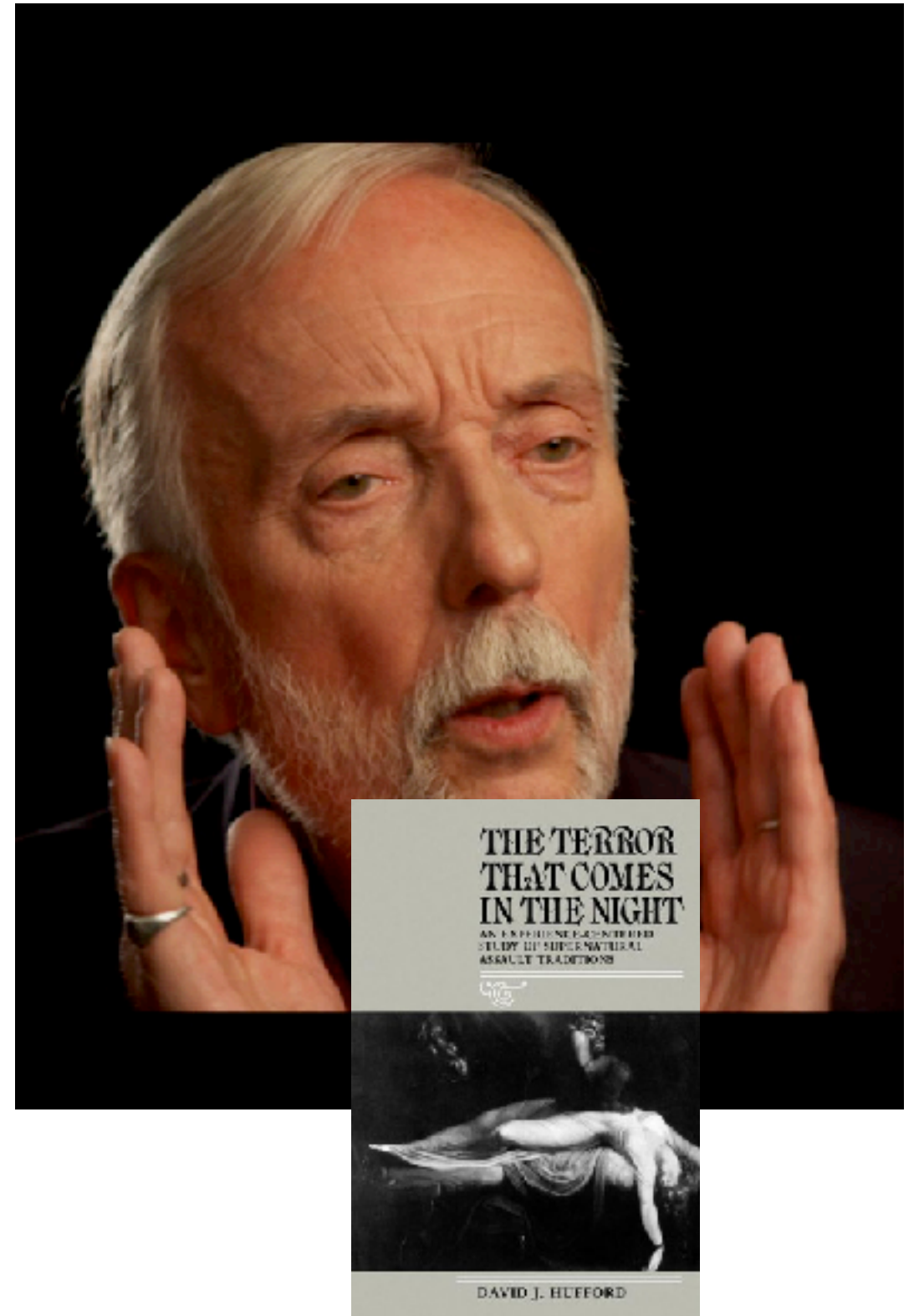
- It is possible to look for broader patterns and trends across a range of narrative accounts.
- Adopt a **comparative approach**.
- Make use of categories, criteria and classifications to analyse data.



Core Spiritual Experiences

- “By core spiritual experiences I mean perceptual experiences that (a) refer intuitively to spirits without inference or retrospective interpretation, (b) form distinct classes with stable perceptual patterns, (c) occur independently of a subject’s prior beliefs, knowledge or intention (psychological set), and (d) are normal (i.e. not products of obvious psychopathology)...such experiences provide a central (core) empirical foundation from which some supernatural beliefs develop by inference.”

(Hufford, in Morehead, 2015, pp. 147-148).

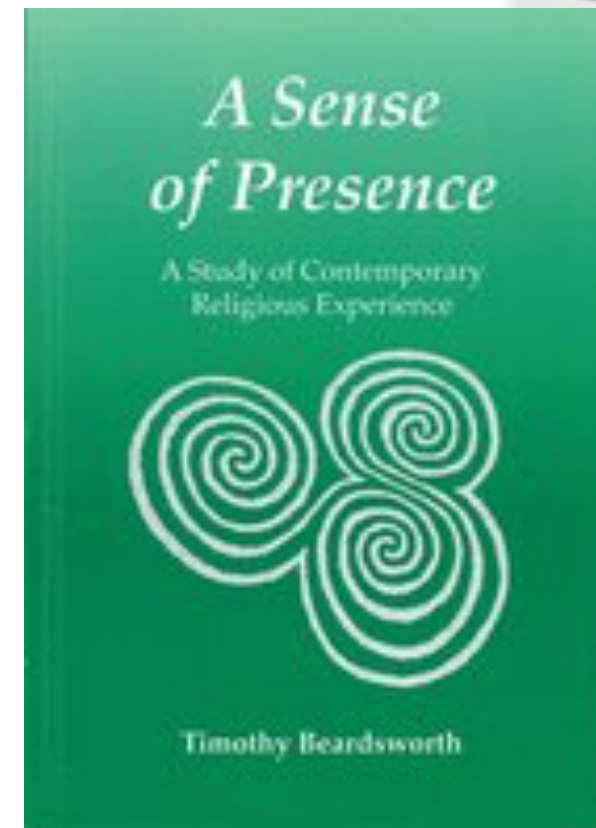
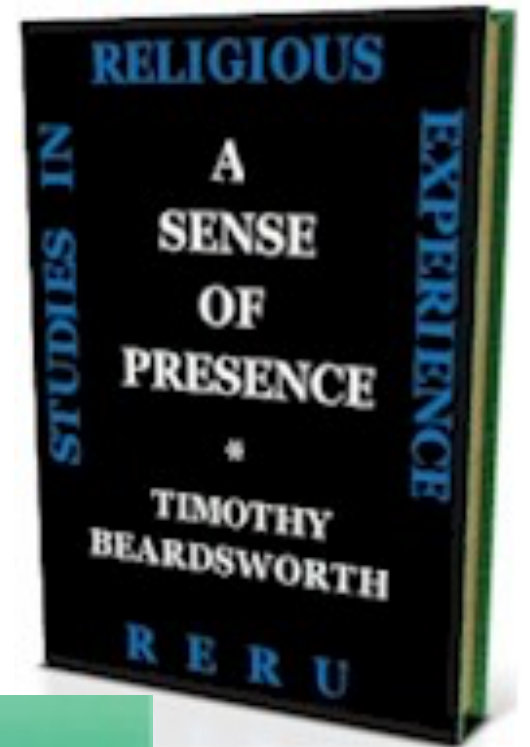


Core Features - Sense of Presence

- In his analysis of the first 1,000 account in the RERC archive Timothy Beardsworth writes:

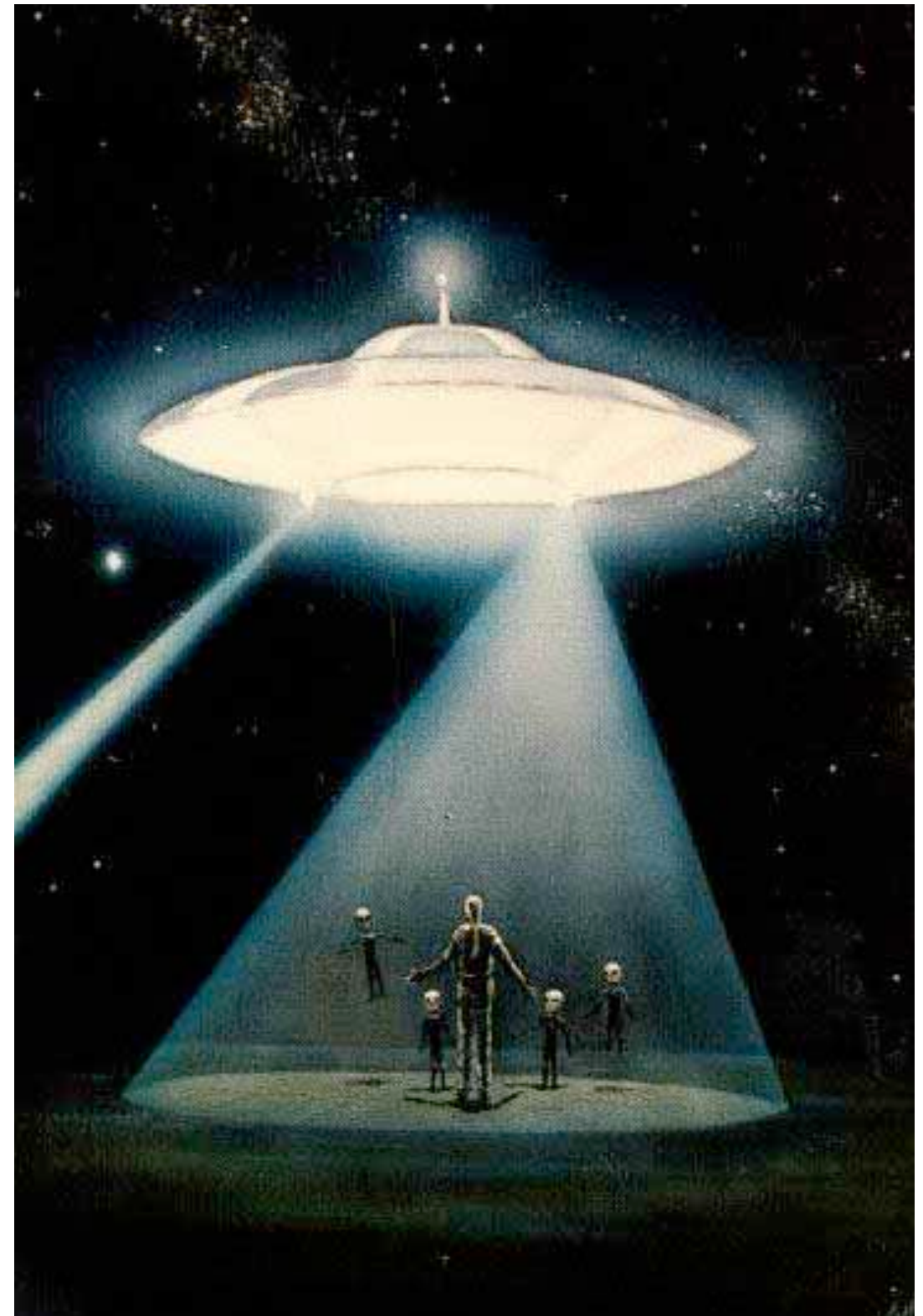
“The episodes I shall quote involve “sensory” phenomena - visions, voices, and the like. I classify the phenomena under separate [headings] according to the “sense” involved: **(1) visual, (2) auditory, (3) tactile, (4) inward sensations.** There is also **(5) the sense of a “presence”, the feeling that someone is there, based on no sensory evidence at all.** This feeling, I think, so far as being out on a limb, somehow underlies the other “sensory” categories” (Beardsworth, 1977, p. ix).

- Further sub-categories, e.g. within visual:
 - a) Visions, b) Illumination of surroundings, c) A light or lights, d) A feeling of unity with one’s surroundings, e) Out-of-the-body experiences, f) transformation of surrounding.



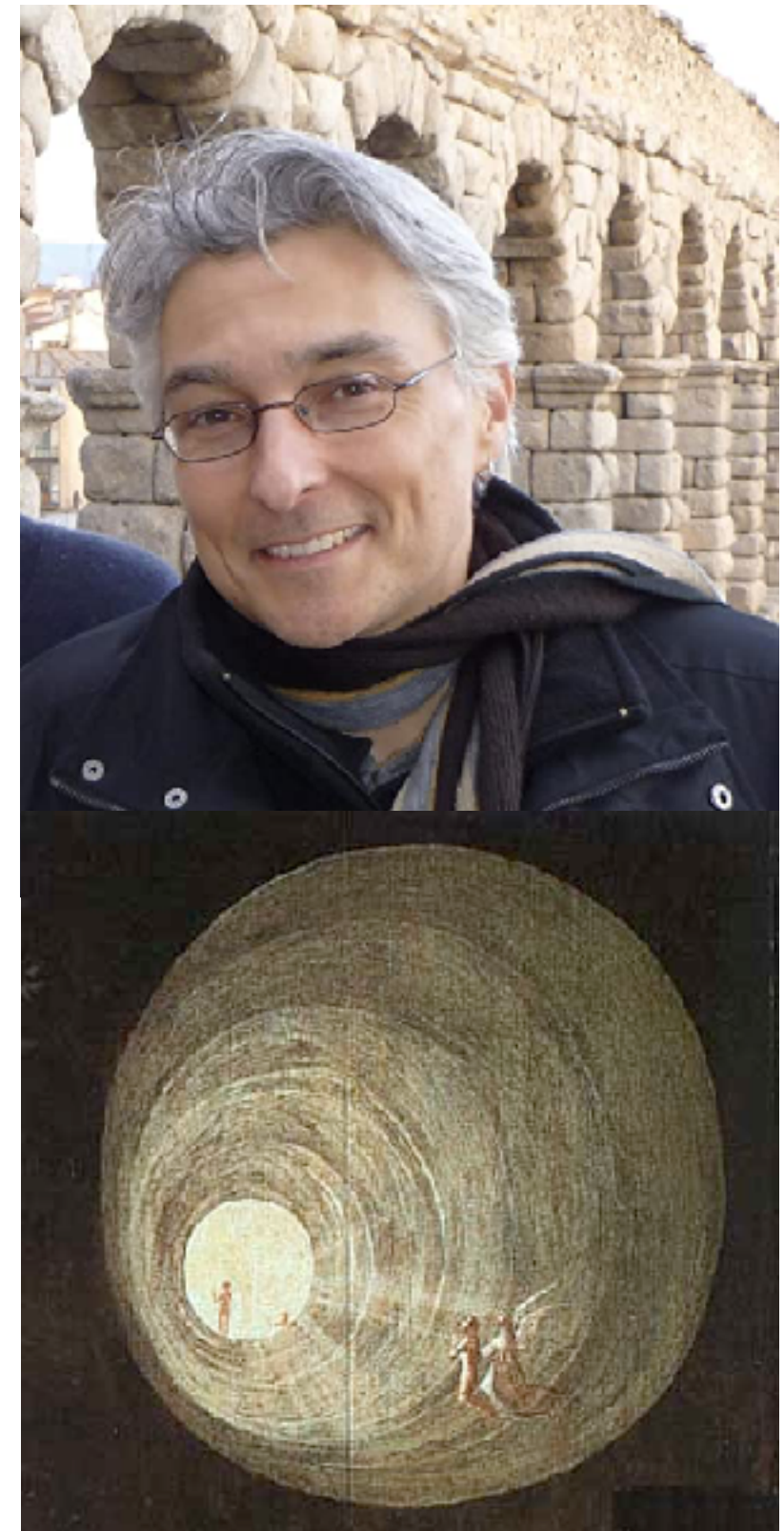
Core Features - Abduction

- Thomas E. Bullard (1989) suggests 8 core features of the abduction experience, based on an analysis of a range of narrative accounts:
 - “1. Capture. Strange beings seize and take the witness aboard a UFO.
 2. Examination. These beings subject the witness to a physical and mental examination.
 3. Conference. A conversation with the beings follows.
 4. Tour. The beings show their captive around the ship.
 5. Otherworldly Journey. The ship flies the witness to some strange and unearthly place.
 6. Theophany. An encounter with a divine being occurs.
 7. Return. At last the witness comes back to Earth, leaves the ship, and re-enters normal life.
 8. Aftermath. Physical, mental and paranormal aftereffects continue in the wake of the abduction” (Bullard, 1989, p. 153).



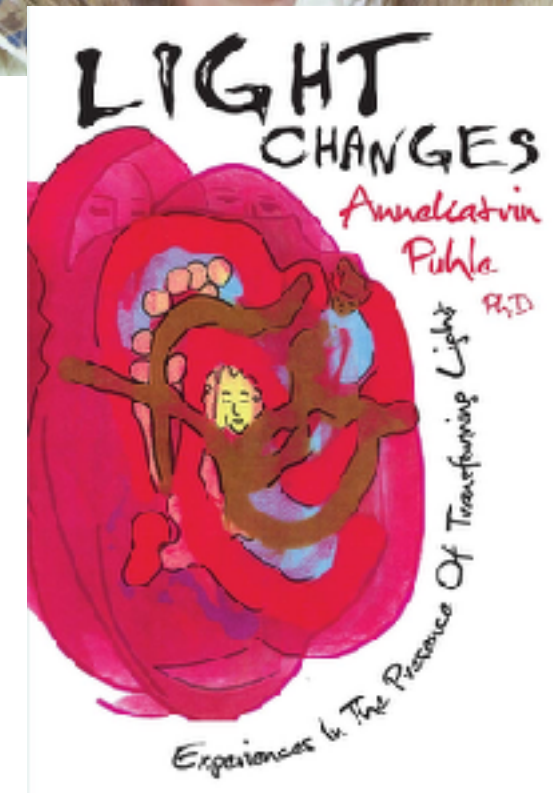
Core Features - Near Death Experiences

- Gregory Shushan (2009) has conducted cross-cultural comparative research on the phenomenology of NDEs.
- Evidence of phenomenological similarities in narrative accounts from different cultural contexts, indicative of core spiritual experiences:
 - **Out of Body Experiences (OBE)**
 - **Corpse Encounter**
 - **Darkness/Tunnel**
 - **Deceased Relatives/Ancestors**
 - **Sense of Presence/Being of Light**
 - **Life Review**
 - **Overcoming Obstacles**
 - **Divinization/Oneness/Enlightenment**
 - **Other Realm/Origin Point.**



Core Features - Experiences in the Presence of Transforming Light

- Annekatrin Puhle collected 809 accounts of 'encounters with unusual lights' from journals, academic studies and first-hand interviews with experiencers.
- Analysis is based around key themes that emerge from the narratives, e.g.:
 1. Exceptional experiences in the absence of light.
 2. Electric light phenomena associated with a dying or deceased person.
 3. Further types of exceptional light phenomena (she lists 21 types of light experience from her sample).
 4. Situations relating the exceptional light experiences.
 5. The state of mind of the percipient.
 6. Content and information contained in the experience.
 7. The interpretation given to the experience and its effect.
 8. Witnesses (Phule, 2013, pp. 27-42).



Not 'experiencing'...

- David Yamane critiques narrative approaches to religious experience on the grounds that:
- "...they are often purely descriptive: merely coding responses into different "types" or "classes" of religious experience....
- "These approaches see people's descriptions of religious experiences simply as realistic representations, not as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render the experiences meaningful and which therefore change over time with the experiencer's life circumstances, or with the social context of the telling..." (Yamane, 2000, p. 180).
- The narrative is not the experience itself.



Some narratives are difficult to classify...

- “I was sitting underneath the willow tree in the back garden and felt an electrical tingle. Turning to look over my shoulder I saw five small figures, very human like but much smaller...They were dressed in brown to dark green clothes – somewhat like tights with sturdy boots and smock like tops, their faces were more angular than human faces and very sun weathered in appearance. We looked at each other for a short period of time – there was an unspoken exchange of understanding (very hard to articulate) and then they marched off underneath a bush.”

Fairy Census, §78, England (Lincolnshire).
Male; 1980s (Young, 2018, p. 64).



Some narratives are difficult to classify...

- “On the Friday a man came to clean the carpet and curtains in the drawing room. Later on there was a complete fusing of everything electrical. Clocks, radios, refrigerator, freezer, T.V. all the lights etc. In the evening I lay down on a sofa, closed my eyes and tried to relax. I then saw several little green men with very unpleasant expressions. They were looking at me. They seemed to be at a distance. I suppose "gnomes or goblins” would be an adequate description. I didn’t like what I saw, and I was reminded of the time I had a rheumatic illness when I was seven, and had been very alarmed by the “little green men” I had seen then. Hallucinations, presumably.

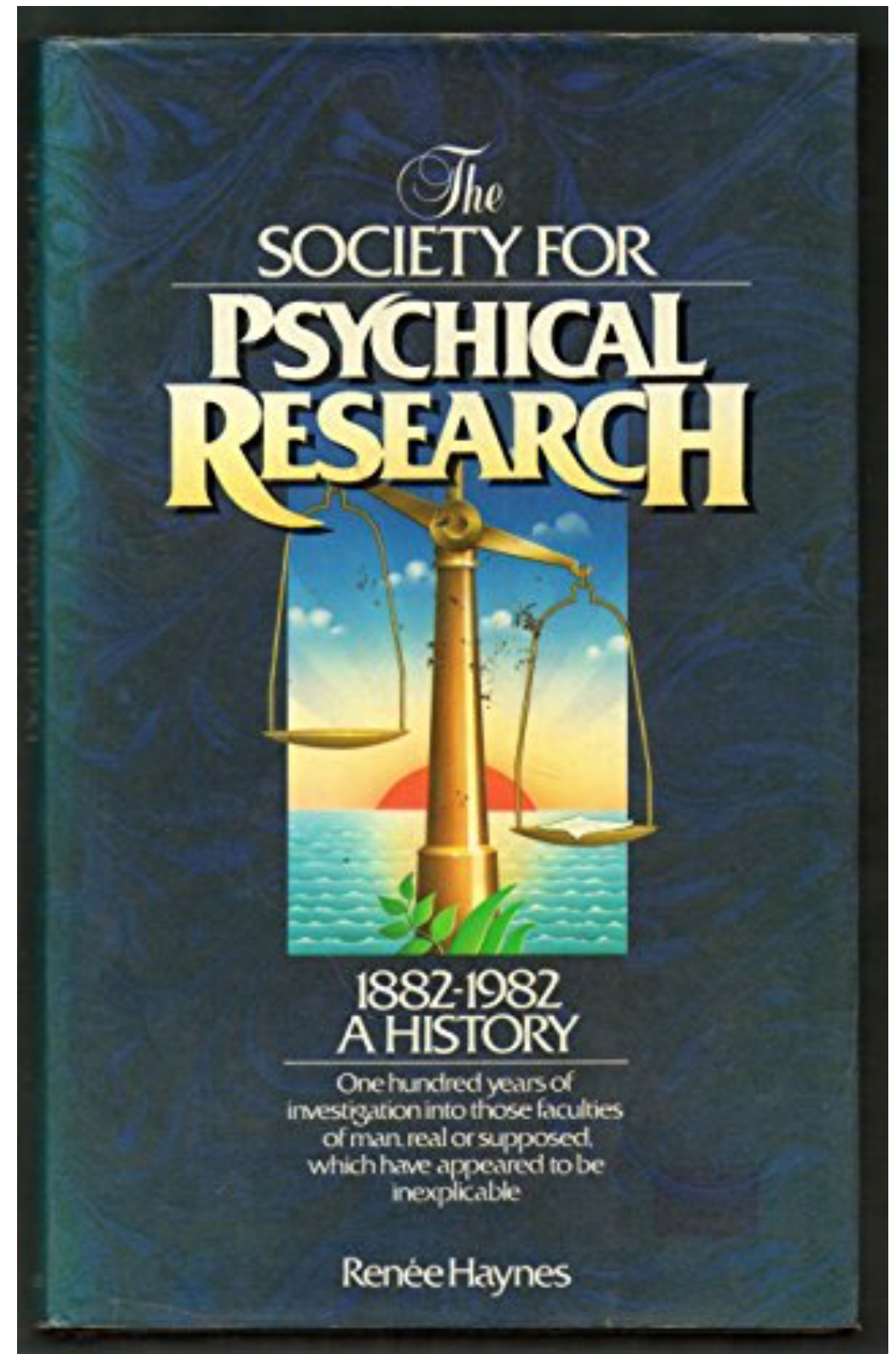
Date of Experience: 1951, Female.
RERC Archive Reference: 000235.

- Interestingly, this account does not appear in Beardsworth’s survey of the first 1,000 accounts in the archive.



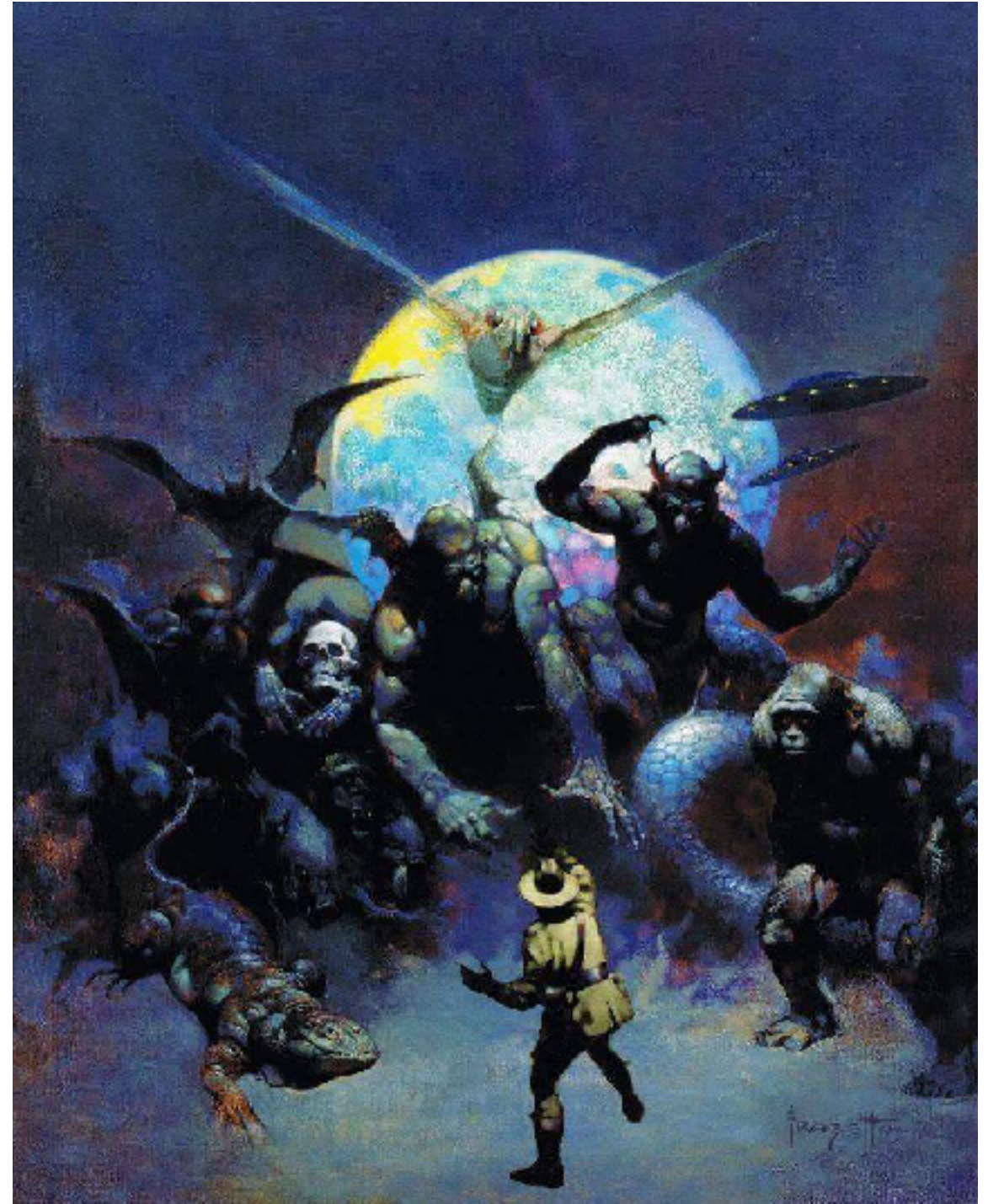
Boggle Thresholds

- The point at which an experience or phenomenon is deemed so outlandish and unlikely that it is entirely dismissed by the researcher.
- Coined by the historian of psychical research Renee Haynes (1906–1994).
- “Individual boggle thresholds will vary...with individual temperament, history, training, and aptitude. They will also be influenced by those of the groups to which each individual is linked: family, friends, school, employment, university. In people brought up in the discipline of the physical sciences the levels of boggledom are likely to differ considerably from the levels found in those brought up in the humanities...” (Haynes, 1980, p. 94).



Ontological Flooding

- “Rather than bracketing out questions of ontology for fear that they might lead to truths (‘damned facts’ in Fort’s terminology) that cannot...fit into the established order of Western academia’s dominant ontology, I suggest that we essentially open the flood gates of ontological possibilities. This places all ontologies on an equal footing, so that while ontological bracketing protects and reinforces the mainstream ‘consensus reality,’ what we might call ontological flooding destabilises it, and opens it up to questioning, exploration and expansion...” (Hunter, 2015, p. 16)



Summary

- Phenomenology is about re-connecting with lived experience of the world.
- This raises the question of whether the world that we experience is the real world, or whether it is produced by or filtered through the senses, brain and cognitive categories.
- The concept of the life-world binds together the elements of experience.
- Bracketing approaches mean that phenomenologists do not have to be concerned with whether the experience is of something real or not - experience is experience.
- Bracketing itself requires us to make ontological assumptions, however.
- In the social sciences phenomenological approaches are usually either autoethnographic or narrative based.
- Experiential-source hypothesis suggests that there are experiences underlying traditions of belief.
- These can be studied by collecting memorates - applying a comparative analysis.
- Core-features can be identified, e.g. in NDEs, abductions, light experiences, etc.
- Boggle thresholds and reduction to categories often leaves out 'anomalous' experiences.
- These need to be taken into consideration as well for what they tell us about broader themes in extraordinary experience.

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