

Thinking about Phenomenology



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Canolfan Sophia
The Sophia Centre

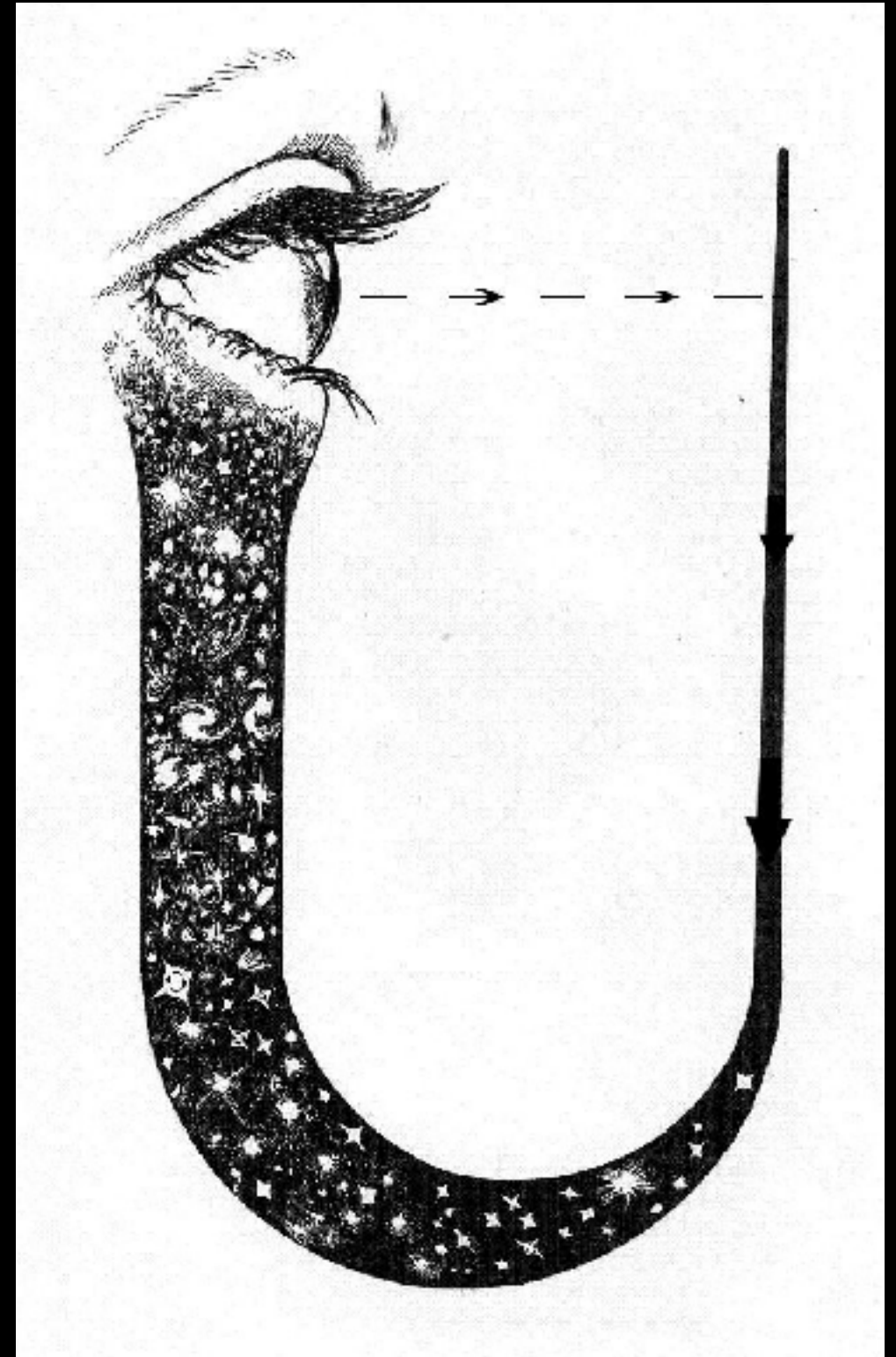
Dr. Jack Hunter
(jack.hunter@uwtsd.ac.uk)

Overview

- What is phenomenology?
- Husserl, the lifeworld and epoche.
- Kant and the phenomenal and noumenal worlds.
- Phenomenologies of landscape.
- Beyond the Brackets: Ontological Flooding.
- What would an ontologically flooded phenomenology of landscape look like?
- Fairies at the bottom of the garden.

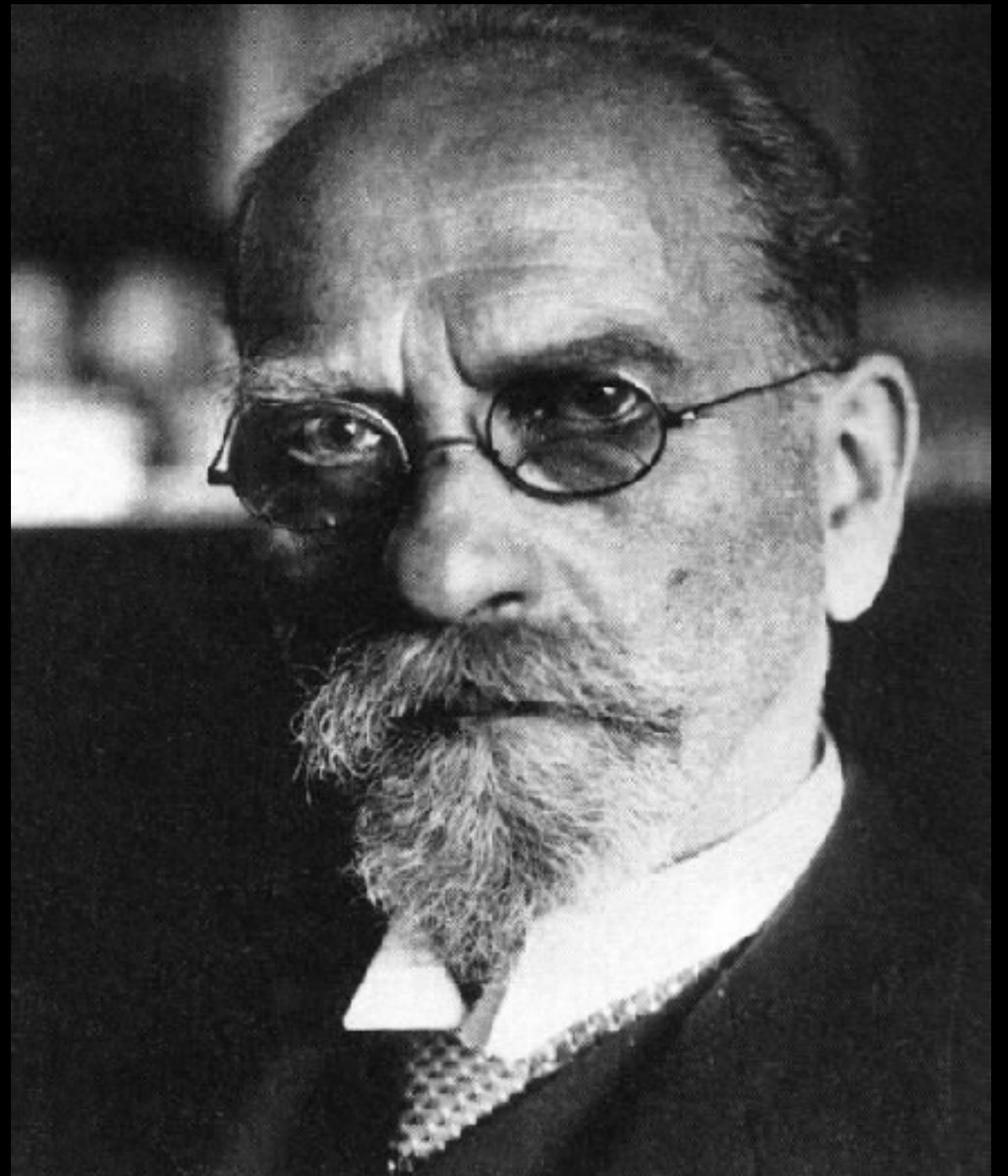
Phenomenology

- 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.



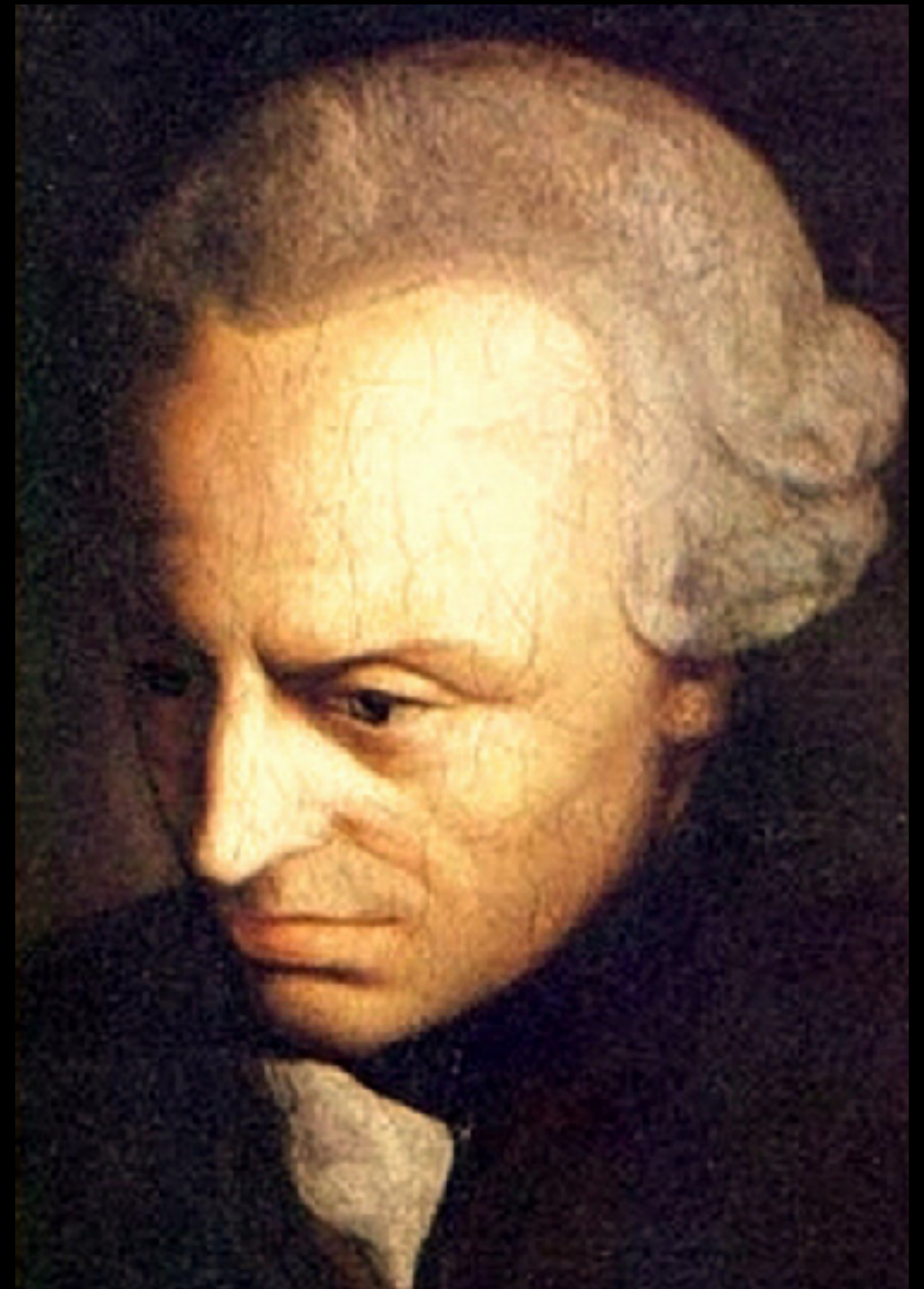
Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)

- 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 this.

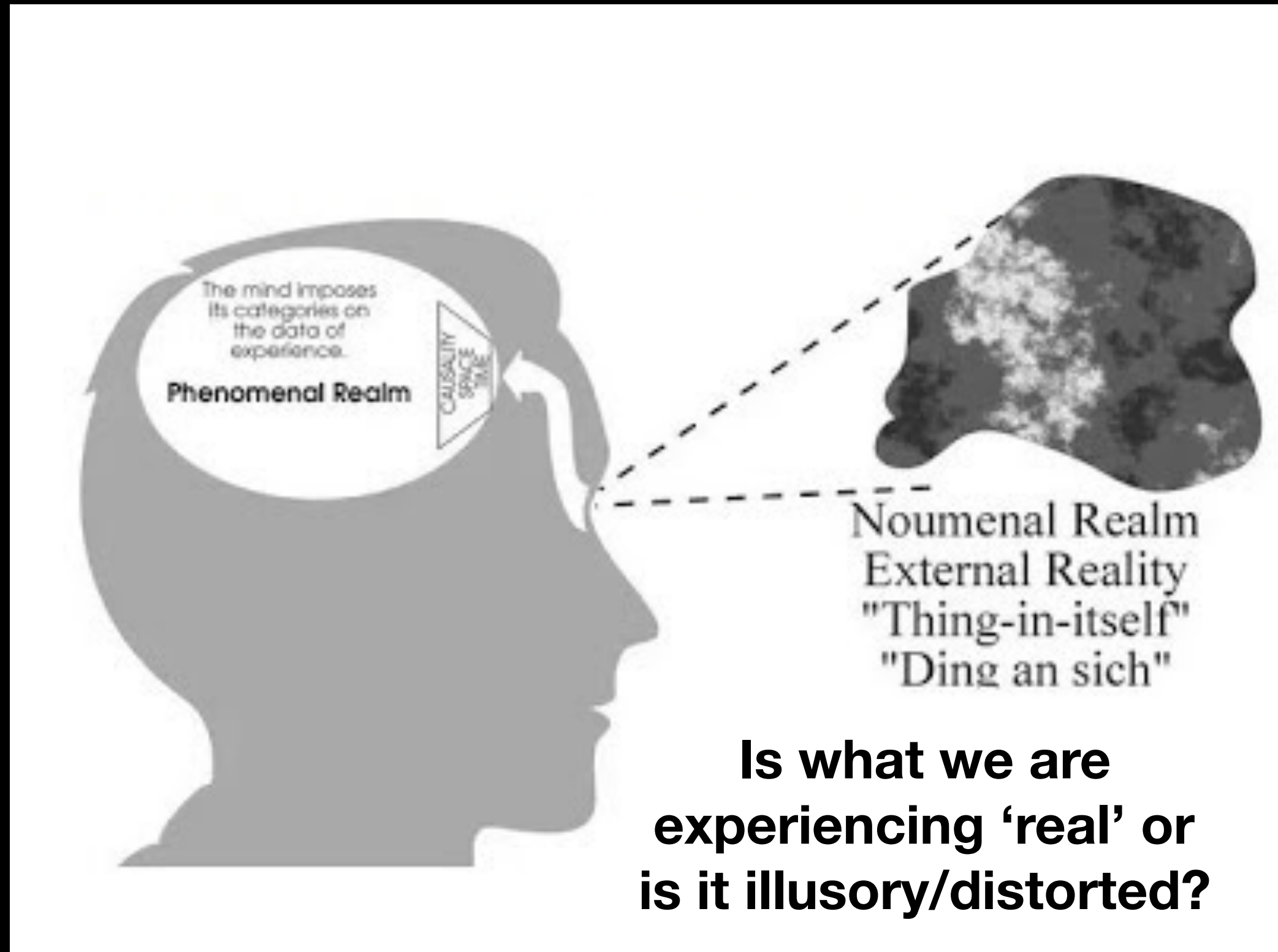


Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

- 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.

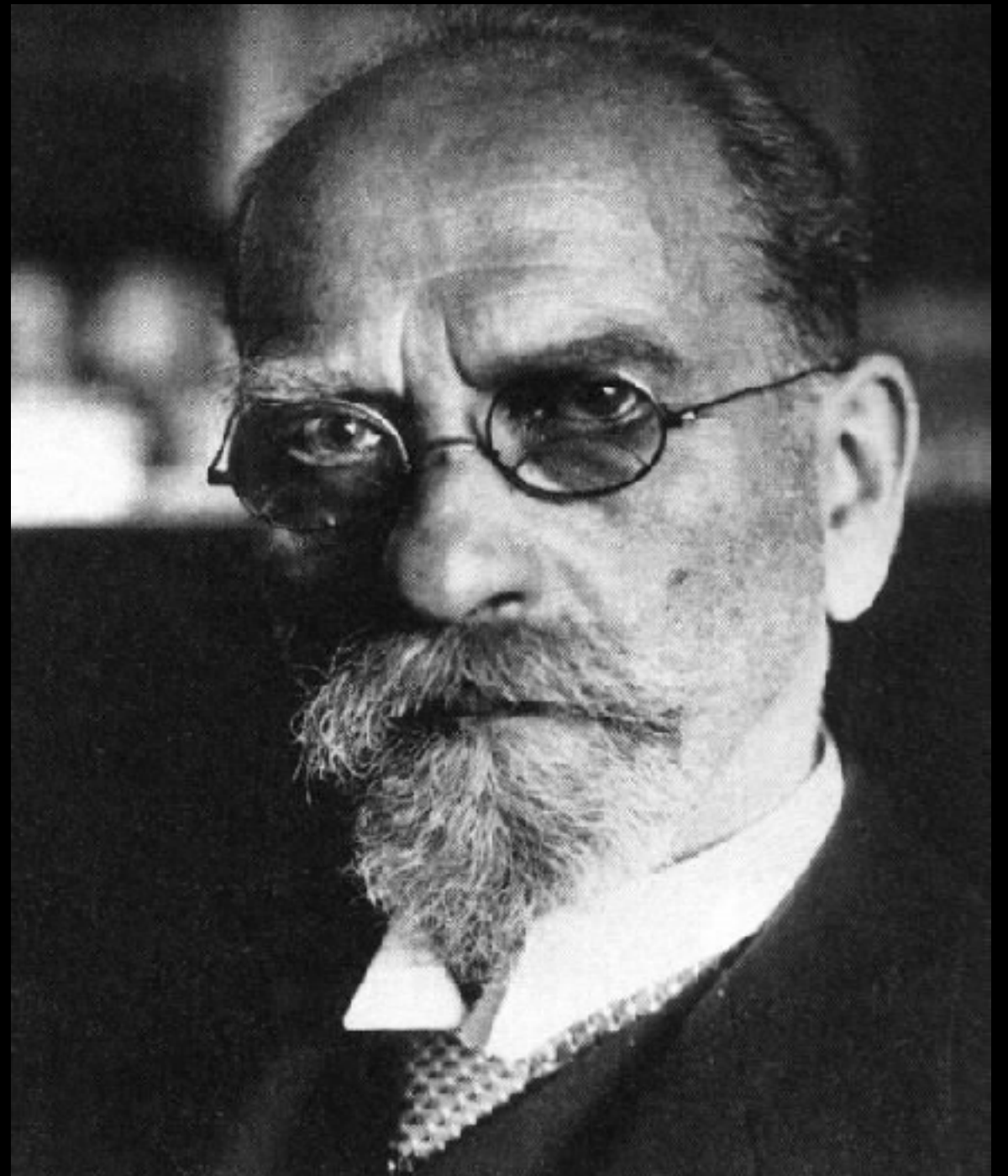


Can we experience reality?



Intentionality and the Life-world (Lebenswelt)

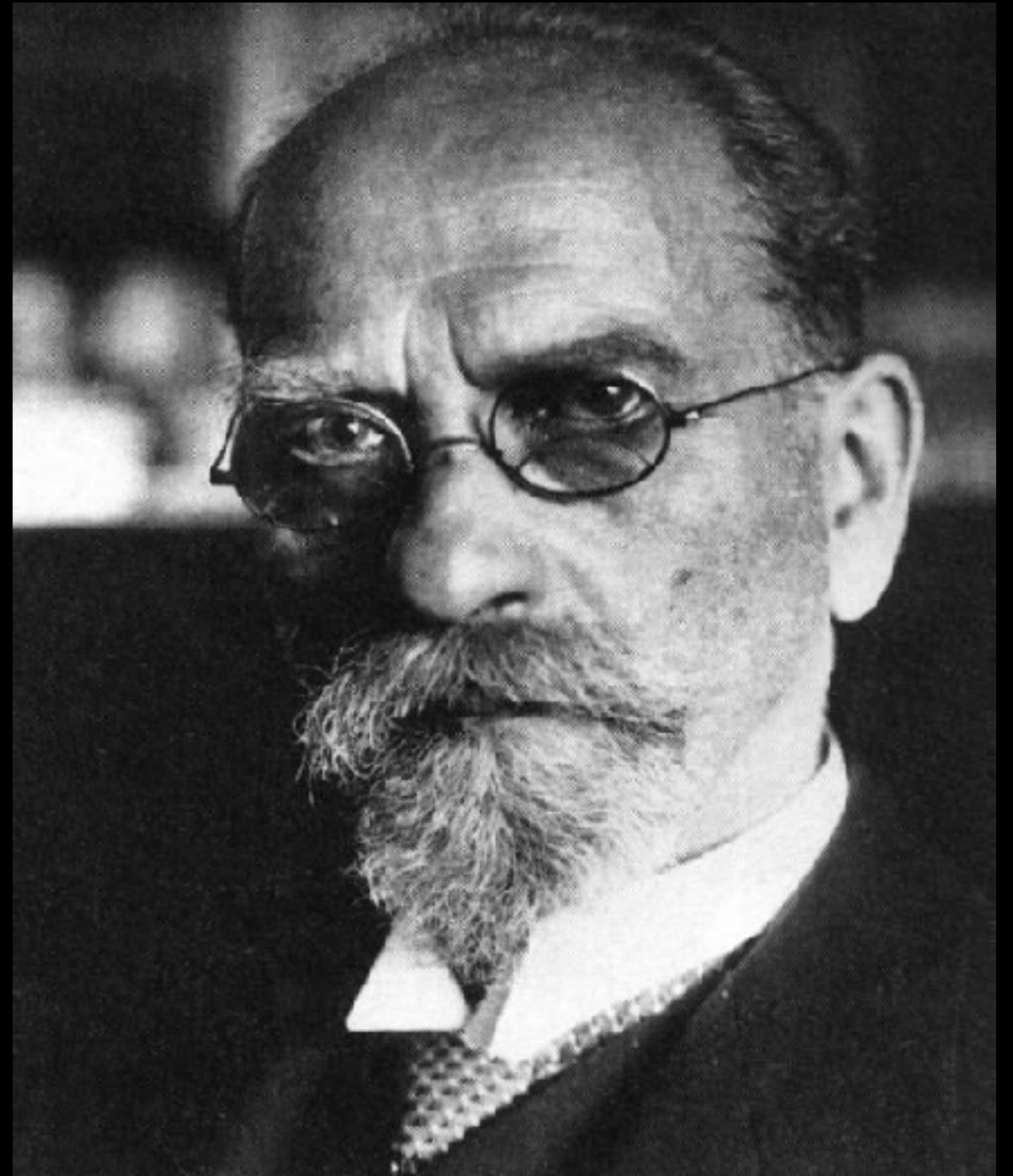
- Breaks down the distinction between the observer and the object being observed.
- Consciousness is always 'of something.'
- The subject and the object are brought together in the concept of *life-world*.



Intentionality and the Life-world (Lebenswelt)

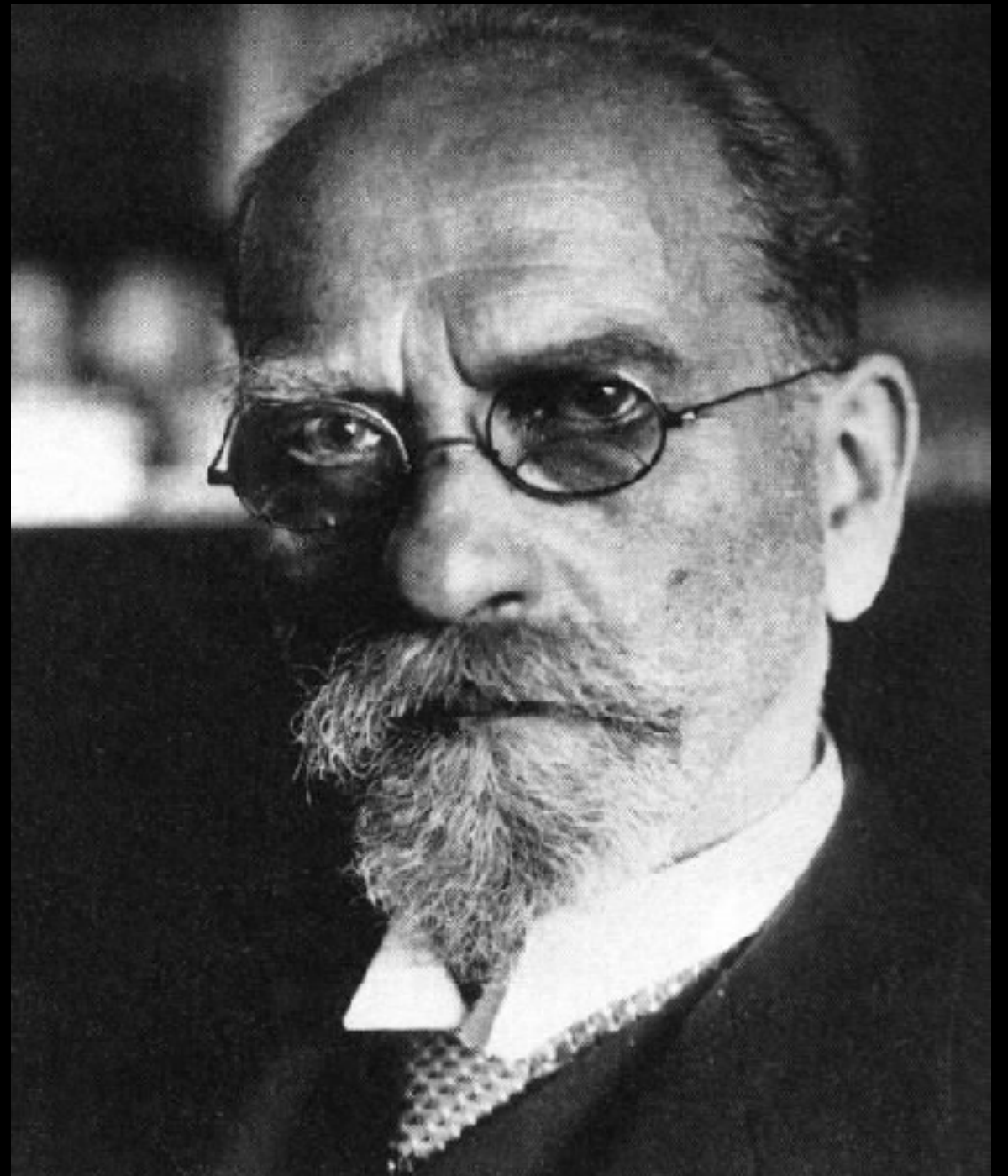
- “The lifeworld is a realm of original self-evidences. That which is self-evidently given is, in perception, experienced as ‘the thing itself’, in immediate presence, or, in memory, remembered as the thing itself ... [It is] the world of straightforward intersubjective experiences ... all the built-up 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).



Bracketing (epoche)

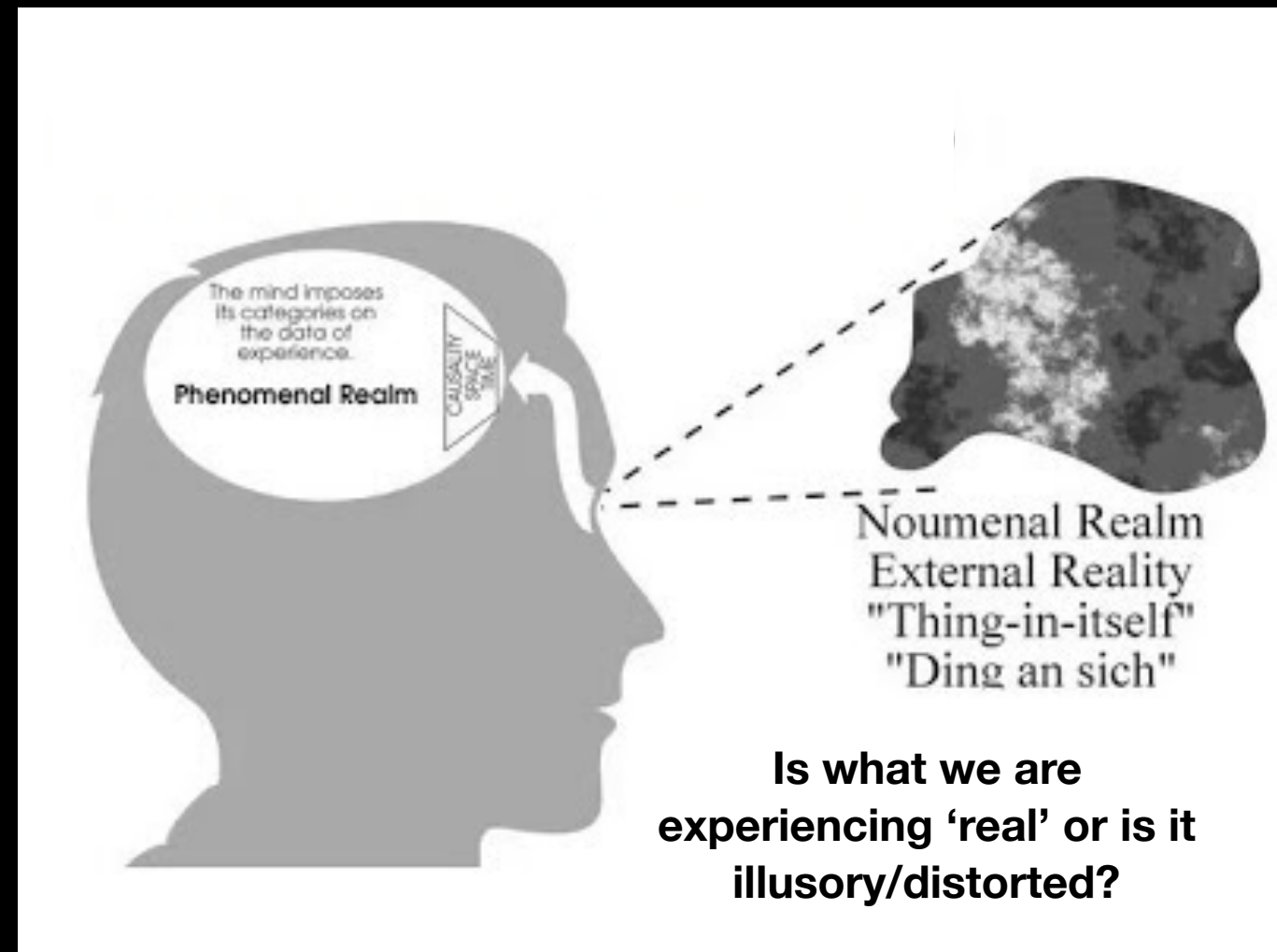
- Husserl also proposes a technique called 'bracketing' or 'epoche' to overcome the problem.
- This involves 'bracketing out' all presuppositions and questions from our descriptions of experience.



Bracketing (epoche)

- 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)



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.”

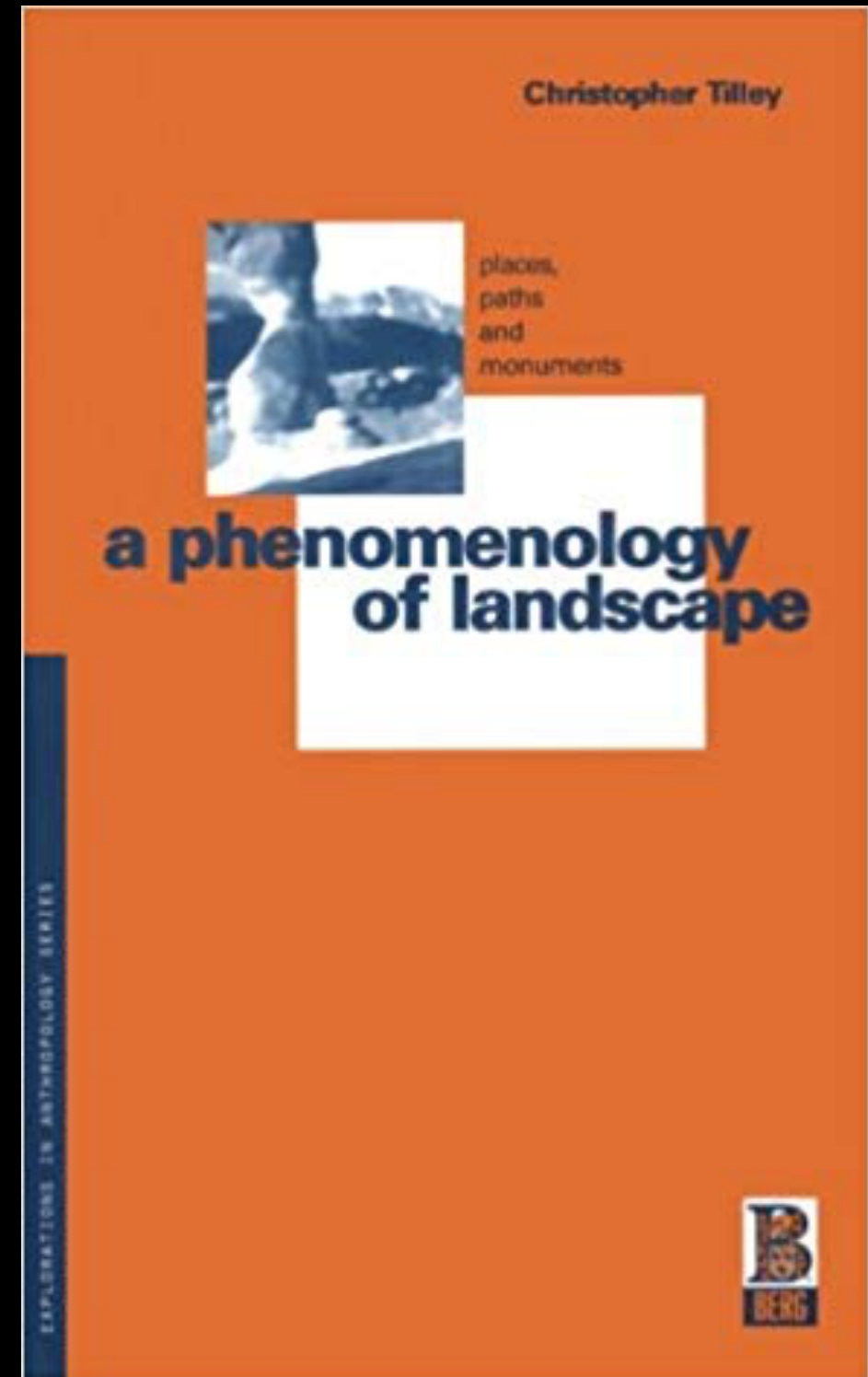
(Ingold, 1993, p. 154)



Christopher Tilley

- “A landscape is a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements and narratives. It is a ‘natural’ topography perspectively linked to the existential Being of the body in societal space.”

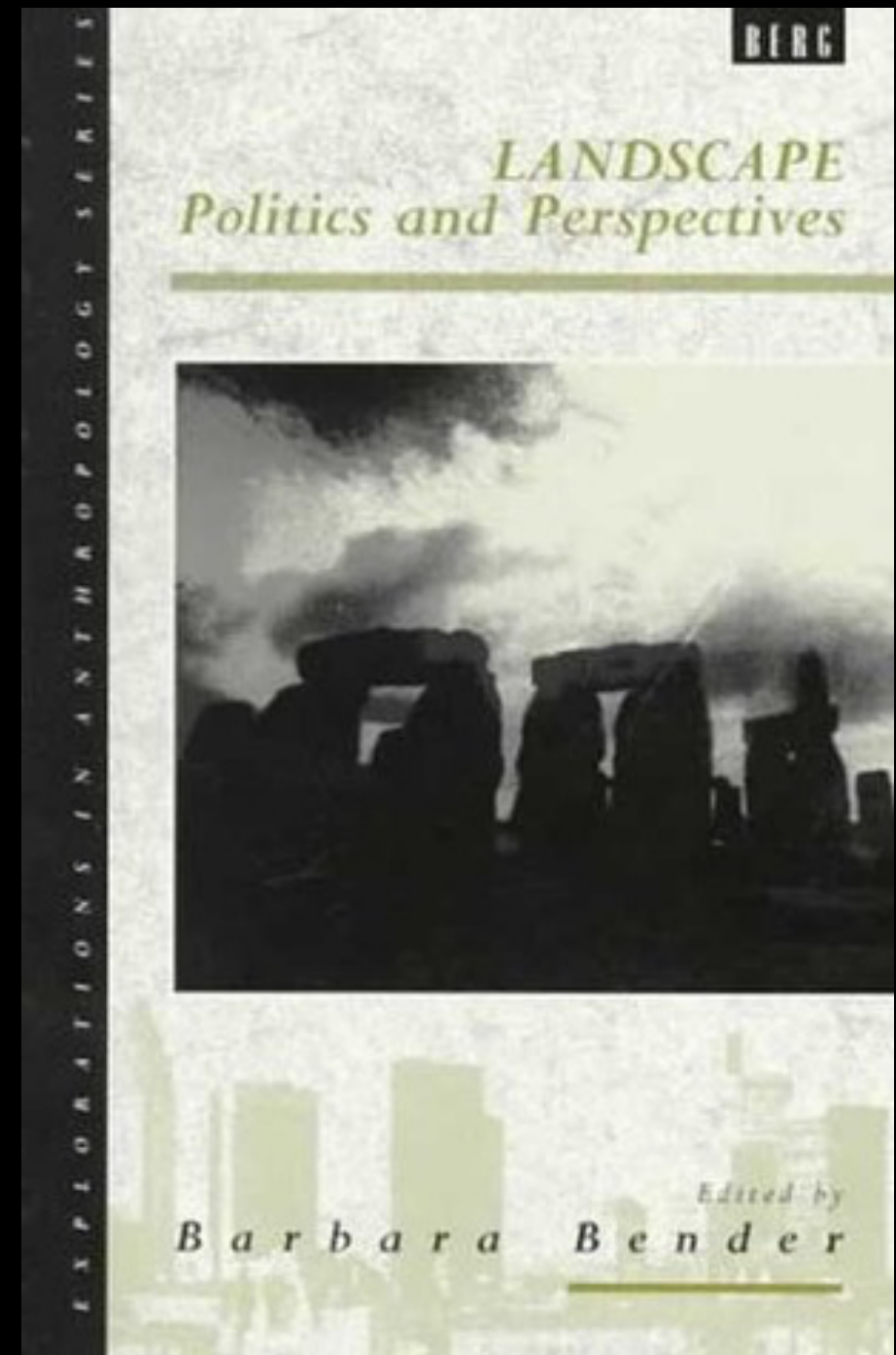
(Tilley, 1994, p. 34).



Barbara Bender

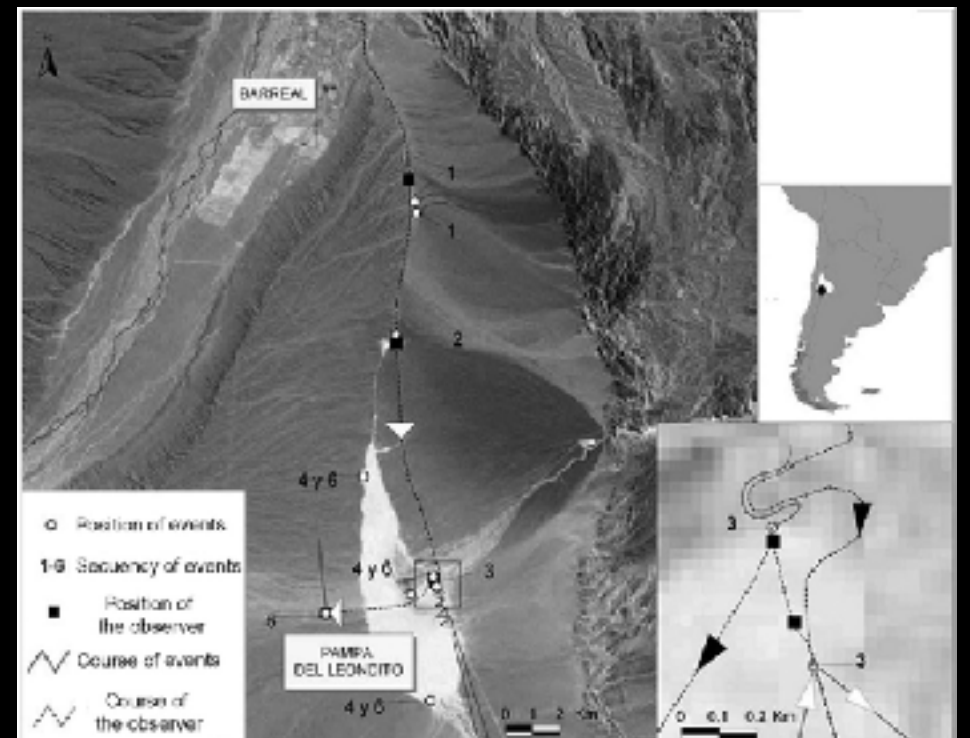
- “*Landscapes and time are not objective, not “a given,” not neutral. (Nor, for that matter, is “nature” or any of the other categories that we might care to consider)...it is we, through our embodied understanding, our being-in-the world, who create the categories and the interpretations...*”

(Bender, 2002, p. s104)



Being-in-the-world

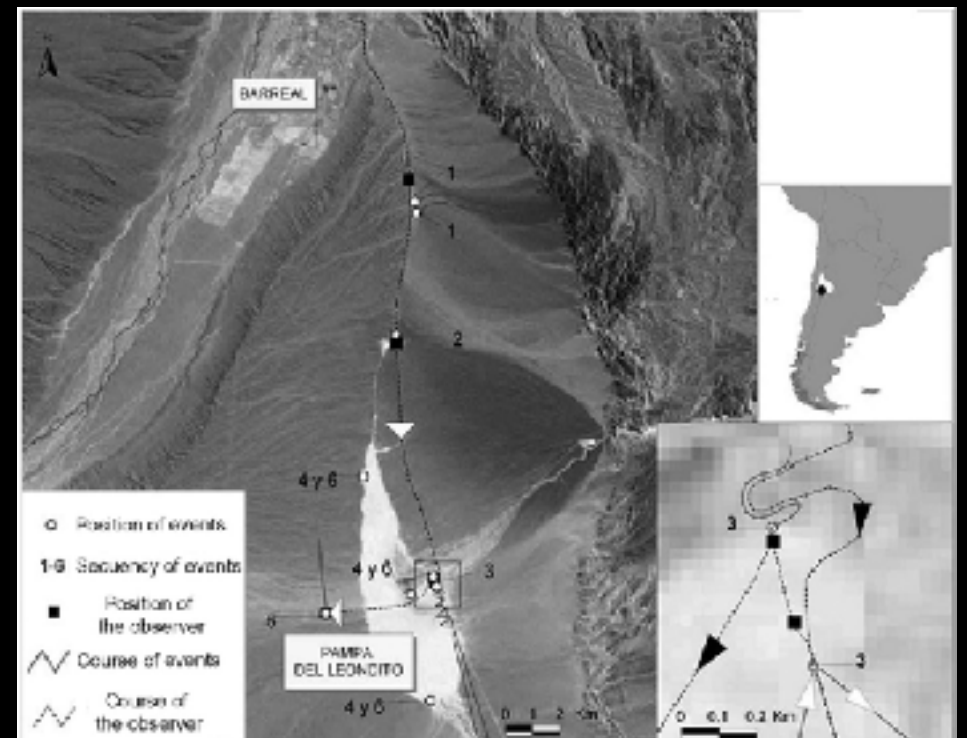
- Being-in-the-world occasionally gives rise to experiences that go beyond what dominant (naturalist/materialist) models allow for.
- Anthropologist Diego Escolar gives a vivid account of such an experience in the Pampa del Leoncito in Argentina.



Being-in-the-world

- “We go forward about 500 meters until Osvaldo stops. A large white greenish light, spherical, not two car lights, is what is coming from the south. Nor is it anymore on the highway, but on the intermediate strip between the highway and the Pampa del Leoncito, where we now are. It approaches in a long and continuous zigzag, dominating everything around. We go back northward, trusting in the protection of the retamos bushes, but it keeps getting closer and we can now distinguish an orange reddish glare. Because the light is now closer, it leaves us once again in doubt; for although it is the approximate size of a big vehicle, it is clearly one single luminous mass, not projecting light beams like reflectors or suchlike. Its aspect is like that of a big flat star, illuminating without blinding, with a strange incongruence between its respectable size and the low light intensity. There are no noises to be heard, either from motors or from broken branches. Its zigzagging is too close and there is no time to escape. Osvaldo is very nervous and his son is completely mute...I seem to be invaded by a sort of emotional anesthesia. How is it that we have not gotten in a panic and escaped at a swift gallop... The light appears to have some body; it is denser than a thick cloud although I cannot find a substance to which it can be compared. Plasma, perhaps? It is suspended about half a meter from the ground, advancing slowly at only 50 meters from us. Osvaldo and his son keep on straight ahead. We are going around a large bush that can hide us. We remain at a standstill; the light has stopped at about 20 meters. Carlos comes down from the horse and begins urinating. A white light illuminates him and just my horse and my hands. The light is more than three meters in diameter and sometimes changes color, from greenish white to orange. It appears to have a denser core in the middle, the place where the color and intensity changes occur. I have no terror but a kind of lethargy.”

(Escolar, 2012, pp. 31-32).



Phenomenology in the Social Sciences

- 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.



What about extraordinary experience?

- What happens when we have experiences that challenge the dominant assumptions of the academy?
- Bracketing the ontological question can 'sanitise' these experiences, but is it intellectually satisfying?



Limitations of Bracketing

- Jeremy Northcote argues that ontological bracketing has serious limitations.
- “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).



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).



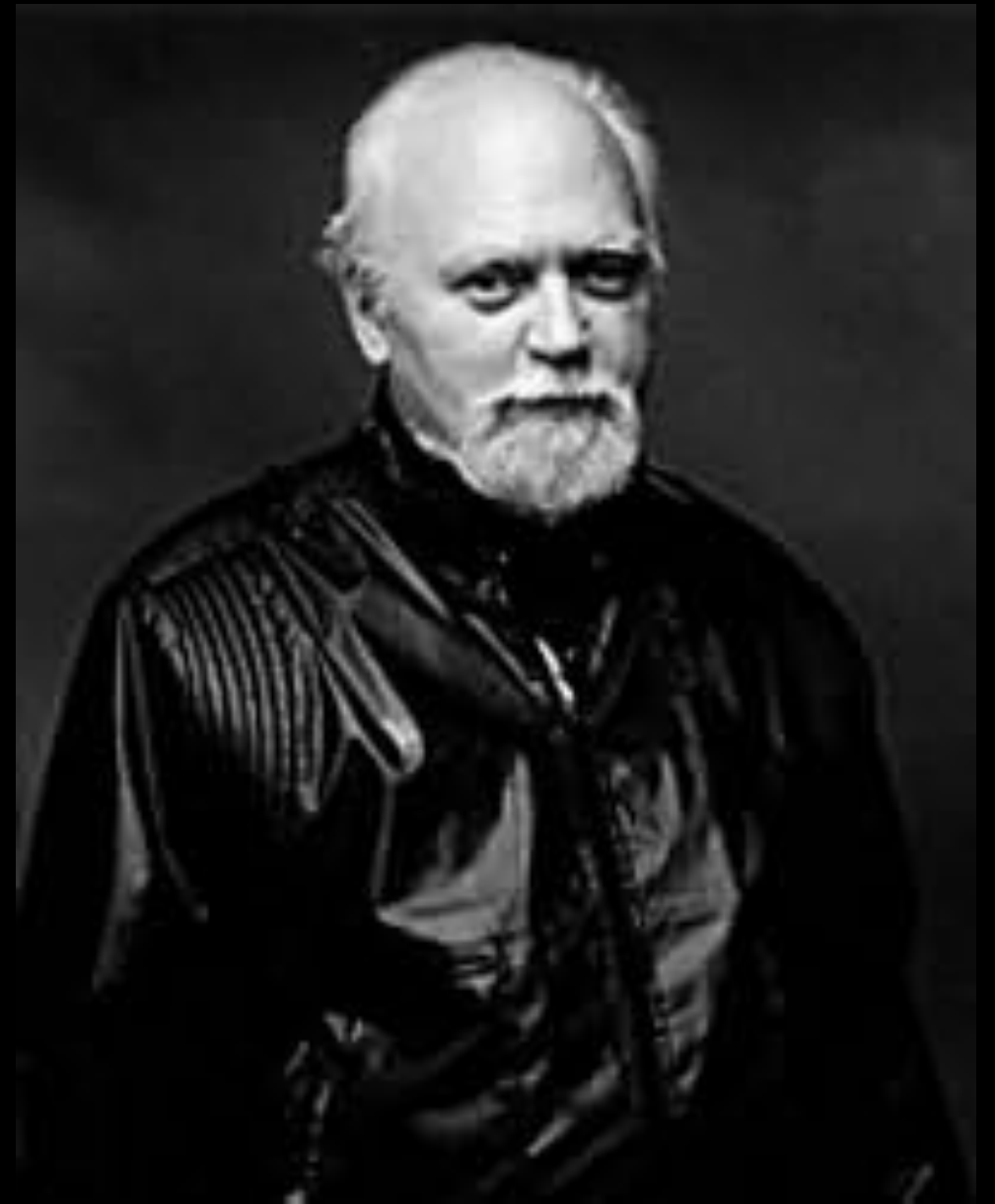
Alternatives

- I have taken inspiration from the work of Charles Fort (1874-1932).
- Wrote about what he called 'Damned Facts.'
- Philosophy of 'intermediatism.'
- "...nothing is real, but [...] nothing is unreal [...] all phenomena are approximations in one way between realness and unrealness' (Fort, 2008, p. 14).



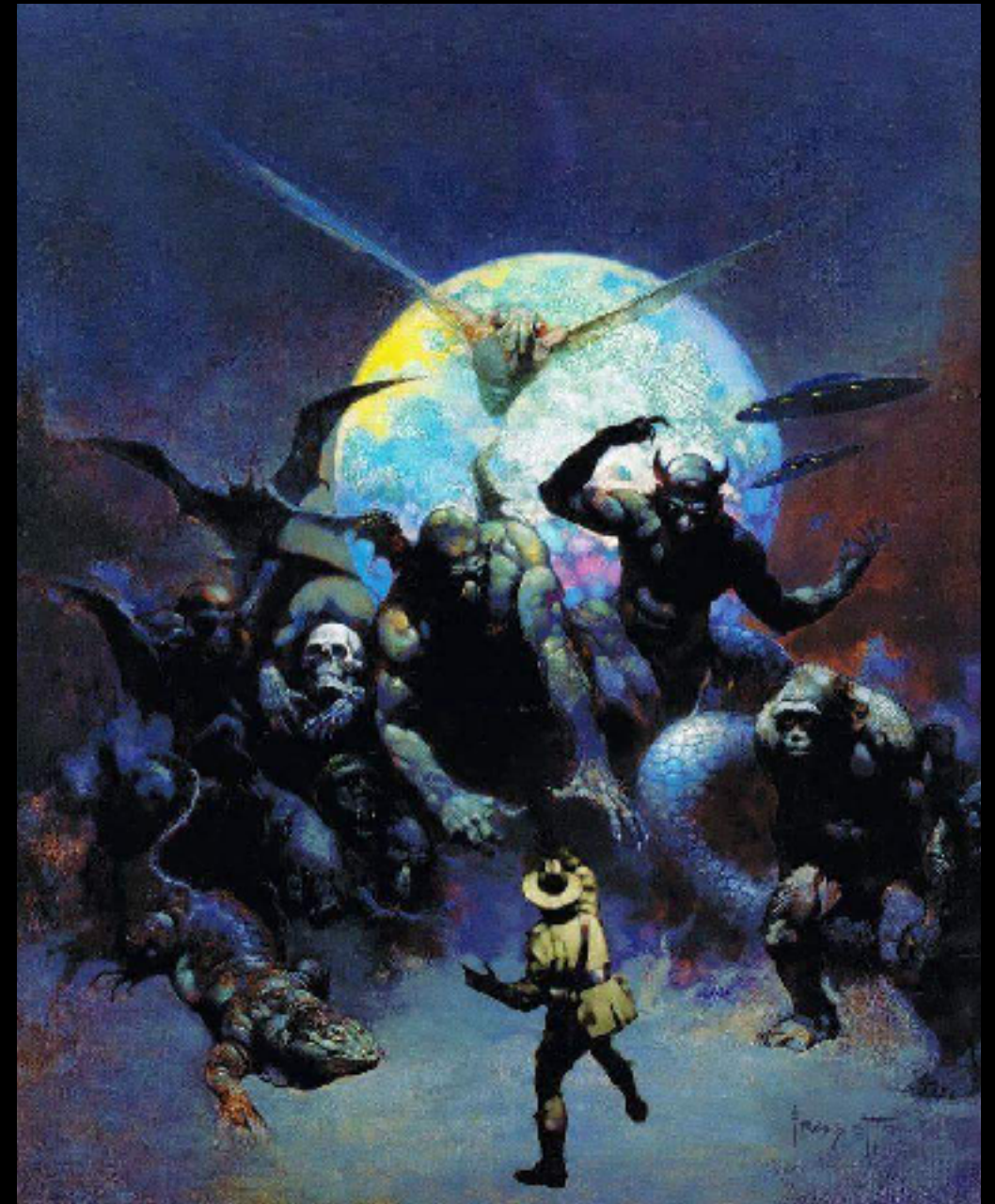
Alternatives

- Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007).
- Proposes what he calls a 'new agnosticism,' sometimes also called 'model agnosticism' or 'creative agnosticism,' he writes:
- “In this state we "are" model-relativists [...] and [are] actively creative; all perceptions (gambles) are actively known as gambles. We consciously seek to edit less and tune in more, and we look especially for events that do not neatly fit our model, since they will teach us to make a better one tomorrow, and an even better one the day after. We are not dominated by the "Real" Universe” (Wilson, 1987, p. 231).



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, by their very nature, 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)



An Ontologically Flooded Phenomenology of Landscape

- What would an ontologically flooded phenomenology of landscape look like?
- Combining perspectives
- complementary models.
- Multiple influencing factors.



Participating in Landscape

- “Greek places - gardens and grottoes or meadows in the landscape - that allowed the presence of gods and invited encounters with them, permitted mortals to cross over the limits to the netherworld, something forbidden to most mortals...”

(Conan, 2007, p. 7).



What to make of the fairies at the bottom of the garden?

- “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).



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