

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

Riccardo Manzotti

The Things That Are Me. The Phenomenological Epochè Turned Upside- down

1. The basic idea

In Western culture, humans have consistently found comfort in a hypothesis that is as curious as it is widespread: the separation between ourselves and the external world. According to this hypothesis, the observer is never the observed thing but something else, whose nature is, of course, mysterious, and distinct from everything found in nature. By this logic, the observer is not a thing. If it were a thing, it would be observed and therefore could not be the observer. At every moment of existence, then, there must be an observer, invisible to itself and to others, which by its very nature is capable of making the world visible. Since it cannot be a thing, it would logically be called a non-thing or not called anything at all. In practice, we call it a “who” instead of a “what,” a subject instead of an object—an observer.

This is an absurd position, unsupported by any facts or elements of our existence. It arises solely from assuming, as either an empirical fact or a necessary principle, the separation between ourselves and the world and, in parallel, denying the possibility of being the things we encounter in existence.

Let me offer a concrete example. I am sitting at a table, looking at a chocolate muffin. This everyday scenario is already riddled with mysteries. There is the “I” that no one sees, including myself! There is the act of seeing something that connects the mysterious “I” and a concrete object. Articulating this in detail, this phenomenon remains utterly mysterious because it connects something that is, by definition, neither physical nor material—the “I,” in this case—with something entirely tangible and defined, like the chocolate muffin. While it is clear what is needed to bake, prepare, crumble, slice, chew, and even digest a muffin—physical things that heat, cook, grind, and break down the molecules comprising the muffin—no one knows what it means to *see* a muffin.

It seems much simpler to see a muffin than to digest one. Yet digestion is a physical process and, while complex (though not extraordinarily so), every part of it involves other physical processes breaking down and recomposing molecules through cause-effect relations. Conversely, the act of seeing, assuming we are not

the muffin, is a metaphysically scandalous process in which something made of chocolate and dough transforms into something completely different: the image of a muffin or the experience of the muffin. Moreover, this image or experience must exist for something—for someone—that, not being the image or experience itself, must have a relationship not only with the muffin but also with its image. This issue has long occupied philosophers and neuroscientists, who, using vastly different approaches, make implausible hypotheses about how this process could occur in a world where it appears impossible.

I won't delve into the countless theories that have built castles in the air over this issue—ranging from neuroscience to philosophy, integrated information theory to the Neuronal Global Workspace Theory. It is enough to highlight two fundamental facts: (1) these theories have so far achieved no definitive results (they have failed, pending contrary evidence), and (2) all these theories are based on a shared, unquestioned assumption. This assumption, as noted earlier, can be summarized as:

I am not the thing(s) I find in existence.

This statement is the culprit at the bottom of Western thought and, with almost no modifications, of contemporary philosophy and cognitive science. It also underpins common sense and blockbuster films like *The Matrix* or *Inside Out*. Moreover, it allows people to distinguish themselves from the physical world, thereby living in a metaphysical state akin to hikikomori while feeling morally superior. The world is out there, ugly and bad, while I am here, good and right.

Yet this presupposition renders the explanation of a basic and everyday fact—like seeing a muffin—insoluble. Moreover, as noted above, nothing supports this presupposition. To prove it empirically, one would have to point to the thing we are not and to the thing we are. In doing so, one could claim that they are indeed two distinct things. But this is not the case.

Why is this statement so pervasive? One additional reason, beyond those mentioned earlier, is the frequent confusion between the “I” and the body (or some part or property of it). It is evident that the body (my body) and the muffin are two different things. The muffin is on the table, and my body is seated here. My body performs actions that may involve and possibly consume the muffin, but they are two distinct entities. There is no doubt that the body and the muffin are two different things. But this does not imply that *I* and the muffin are two different things. For this implication to hold, I would need to know that I *am* my body or that I exist *inside* my body. However, this is something we do not know at all. In fact, all we know is that I and my body are two different things. How do I know this, contrary to what neuroscientists and naïve materialists claim? Simply by applying the most basic criterion of identity—sometimes attributed to Leibniz

but present since Plato and probably earlier in common sense. If two things are identical, they must necessarily share the same properties, at least some of them. Note that I am not saying this principle is sufficient but only that it is necessary, at least in some weak version.

In short, if two things are entirely different, they cannot be the same. In the case of the “I” and its body, they are entirely different. Furthermore, the body, being a thing in the world, cannot “see” another thing in the world. Being a thing, the body cannot be a non-thing or the type of non-thing that tradition has called the “I.” The body or some part of it makes no difference.

So, are we forced to resign ourselves to the idea that the simplest fact—the presentation of the world to us—is an unfathomable mystery? No. There is a very simple solution: question this presupposition and do not take it as true. Let us try denying it and consider the possibility that, after all, we might be the things we encounter in existence.

If that is the case, then what happens when we say, “I see a muffin”? Quite simply, the thing I am *is* the muffin. The muffin, rather than requiring a soul, an immaterial mind, an invisible stream of informational bits, a computational process, or an emergent neural property, is simply a chocolate muffin sitting on the table.

This hypothesis, already presented elsewhere (Byrne & Manzotti, 2022; Manzotti, 2017a, 2017b, 2019), is called the *Mind-Object Identity Hypothesis* (or MOI). While it may seem radically distant from the positions of neuroscience, it is actually a form of physicalism and, in terms of explanatory structure, is fully analogous to non-dualist attempts to explain consciousness within dualism.

However, the great obstacle to understanding our place in the world remains the phenomenological attitude, which will be the focus of this contribution.

2. The mistake of Husserlian phenomenology

The other major school of thought that prevents us from situating our existence within nature is, of course, the phenomenological attitude. By this term, I do not aim to identify a specific position but rather refer to a broad collection of views that, from Husserl to Zahavi, despite their variations, have thrived on the illusion of being able to discuss experience without incurring an ontological cost (as substance dualism or idealism did, which were empirically unjustified but ontologically honest). In this context, it is impossible to provide a complete critique of phenomenology, but its fundamental error can be highlighted: the belief that one can start from a neutral experiential or phenomenal dimension detached from the natural background.

Given the spatial constraints, I will limit myself to two key points that schematically define the framework of the phenomenological attitude. Far from offering a solution, this framework is one of the main reasons for our inability to situate our existence in reality.

The primary issue is that the phenomenological attitude assumes the dimension of experience as prior to the natural dimension. Although the phenomenological tradition has always sought to avoid the ontological implications of dualism, it has nonetheless always presupposed that experience is the foundation of our being-in-the-world. To illustrate this, consider the famous passage by Edmund Husserl, where he outlines the notion of *epoché* (Husserl, 1912):

For us, the entire world, as posited in the natural attitude, as it is indeed found in experience, entirely ‘free from theories, as it is indeed experienced,’ and clearly announced in the connection of experiences, is now ‘deprived of validity’: unproven, but also unchallenged, it is to be bracketed.

The idea that the natural world should be bracketed and that the natural attitude is beholden to some naïve presupposition has been extraordinarily influential. Unfortunately, it is entirely mistaken because it commits the very error it seeks to correct: in attempting to eliminate a false belief, it introduces another. The denial of nature as nature introduces the phenomenon as phenomenon, which can only be understood, barring terminological tricks, as experience qua experience. When Husserl writes that “the entire world [...] is now ‘deprived of validity,’” he makes an assumption far weightier and more unjustified than the one he is trying to escape (Husserl, 1912). To rid himself of the naïve idea of the object, he introduces an equally naïve idea of the subject, experience, or phenomenon.

What could it mean for the world to be “for someone,” if not by denying the existence of the world and admitting that the world presents itself perspectively on the phenomenological stage?

Naturally, from Husserl’s work to the present, there have been countless reformulations of the notion of the phenomenon or the phenomenological attitude, often (unintentionally) serving to secure a “free lunch” at the ontological table. Phenomenologists refuse to pay the cost of an additional ontological level (dualism? Never!) and thus employ complex formulations to speak of the phenomenon as something that appears. Then, of course, to avoid accusations of dualism, numerous paths have been attempted—from Merleau-Ponty to Zahavi, from Myin to Gallagher. Yet, they remain prisoners of the phenomenological dimension, consistent with the original roots of Husserl’s thought (Gallagher & Schmicking, 2010; Gallagher, 2023; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Hutto & Miyn, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Zahavi, 2014, 2019).

Appearance is conceived as distinct from existence. It is the rejection of naturalism that inevitably opposes the existence of things to their appearance, which only makes sense if it is not pure existence. Otherwise, there would be no need to reject naturalism.

Put simply, if it were true, as many phenomenologists have tried to argue (most notably Dan Zahavi), that the phenomenon is the sole reality (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Zahavi, 2014, 2019), then that would constitute naturalism, and we could simply replace phenomena with things. Phenomena would then become the true nature, akin to the sensism proposed by figures like Mach or Avenarius.

3. The irredeemable mistake of the notion of experience

The word “experience” is a false friend—in fact, it is the problem from which everything else follows. The very use of this term places us in a state of ontological confusion. If I say, “there is an apple,” and then add “there is the experience of the apple,” I have, in effect, created a bifurcation in reality. Appearance is no longer existence.

The problem with appearance is that it always requires someone to whom something appears. But even if this were not the case, as in Bergson’s notion of the pure image (Bergson, 1896), the question would still remain: why must the world “appear” rather than simply *be*? The idea of appearance is grounded in the assumption that we are not the thing that appears and that appearance is a way of making present to us something that we are not. This absurdity then unfolds along the well-worn tracks of notions like representation, intentionality, or mental content—concepts that pile a series of pseudo-problems atop the original root issue: the assumption that the experience of the world is distinct from the world itself.

If we accept the claim, made by many phenomenologists, that their position is not dualistic, then we must conclude—logically—that the world is made up of pure images or phenomena, and that the scientific image of the world, to use Sellars’ terminology, is merely a construction based on these entities. Phenomena would then become the new atoms, the new quarks, with which the world is constructed. The problem is that, if this were true (and it is not, simply because this construction does not exist for the very good reason that it does not work), we would be back at the problem phenomenology was originally meant to address. We would have a world made of things (events or properties), and this world would no longer “appear”; it would simply exist.

Let me give an example. The “physical” redness of an apple, that property definable independently of its appearance, does not “appear” but is a substance, in the sense that it underlies phenomena and persists in its own right. The physical

apple does not need someone to see it in order to exist, nor does it need to exist as appearance.

Where does the need for a level of reality that “appears” come from? It stems from the mistaken assumption that we are not the thing that is present, and therefore from the necessity of making the thing “be,” in some way, where it is not, by means of something that is not a thing in turn (if it were, the problem would resurface).

This absurdity, elevated to a foundational principle, generates a whole series of other absurdities—as we have seen. The error lies in thinking that we are not the thing and, therefore, if we are not the thing—if we are not a thing—we are a non-thing, or we are not a thing at all, which amounts to the same. The very notion of experience (like its related concepts of intentionality, representation, content, thought, or image) is intrinsically contradictory.

The concept of experience is extremely dangerous because, with its ontological implications, it immediately puts us in a position of disadvantage from which it is impossible to proceed further. If we use the word “experience,” we have already lost. We have already let the enemy inside the walls, and no epistemic effort, however great, will be able to repel it, because it is already within. Expressions like “I experience the apple” or, more simply, “I see an apple” are true metaphysical tangles with no hope of resolution. Once the word “I” or “experience” is used, we have already conceded what we want to deny: a separation between nature as the domain of existence and experience as the domain of appearance.

Phenomenology, far from offering a neutral foundation, creates, with various justifications, an insoluble problem. Experience is not the starting point from which to discover the world; it is an artificial construct that reifies a negation. Experience is the reification of the assumption that we are not the things that constitute the world.

4. All is just existence, albeit relative

Naive naturalism, the original target of phenomenology, had its flaws, primarily stemming from the fallacy of “misplaced concreteness,” as clearly articulated by Alfred N. Whitehead (Whitehead, 1925). This fallacy involves mistaking the abstract for the concrete. Recently, Frank, Gleiser, and Thompson described this fallacy as follows (Frank et al., 2024):

“This is ‘the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete’—accidental because it’s unnecessary for the actual practice of science. The bifurcation of nature exemplifies the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, because it arises from mistaking the mathematical abstractions of physics (average kinetic energy of atoms or molecules) for concrete reality (hot and cold) and

proposing to reduce the concrete to the abstract. This reduction nonsensically reverses the dependence relation (the abstract always presupposes the concrete)."

The bifurcation of nature described by these authors has been around since the time of Galileo and Locke and has had many incarnations. Setting aside historical details, let's use the example provided by Frank et al., namely temperature. On one side, there is an event that is part of our existence: heat. At this point, tradition and education strongly tempt us to speak of the sensation of heat as opposed to temperature itself. Indeed, as I wrote the sentence above, I was tempted to phrase it as: "on one side, there is a phenomenon that is part of our experience." However, had I done so, I would have presupposed that there is something that constitutes the appearance of the world, which I call "experience," distinct from the world itself. This would assume the dichotomy of experience and existence as a given fact, whereas it is entirely unproven.

The position defended in this article, corresponding to the Mind-Object Identity (MOI) theory, avoids this misstep. There is no reason to suppose a priori that nature presents itself in experience or even to someone. Nature simply exists.

Returning to the initial problem: striving to maintain a neutral position—not in the sense of founding a neutral ontology (as Bergson, James, or Whitehead attempted), nor in the phenomenological sense skewed toward experience, but rather in the sense of avoiding any assumptions—I believe the starting point is the avoiding to assume that we are not a thing or a self in relation with the world. In contrast, let's consider bluntly whether we can be just the objects in the world.

There is an event we call heat (or cold). In agreement with Frank et al., the prevalent attitude today involves a bifurcation of nature, starting with a distinction between the experience of heat and an abstraction expressed as the value of temperature, which is, in reality, a complex abstract construction. The two extremes of this bifurcation share nothing in common. Simplifying somewhat, we might say that phenomenology considers the moment of experience more fundamental, while science, falling prey to the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, prefers the abstract model. Returning once more to Frank et al. (Frank et al., 2024):

The parable of temperature illustrates the point: kinetic energy due to the motion of atoms and thermodynamic temperature as a measure of atomic motion are abstractions from the concrete reality of hot and cold. Whitehead's point is that thermodynamic temperature is abstract, whereas hot and cold are concrete, and that abstractions presuppose a concrete basis, so we should not think that thermodynamic temperature is more real than hot and cold.

Husserl's phenomenological reduction resolves nothing, as it accepts this dichotomy and chooses one of its terms. In a sense, where science relies on naive naturalism, traditional phenomenology relies on naive experientialism.

The MOI solves this problem by rejecting the ontological framework altogether and proposing a different solution. The solution lies in remaining strictly within the domain of existence. Thus, there is no bifurcation, no mute properties or modes of appearance, no simple objects as in naive naturalism, nor modes of appearance as in phenomenology. What is there, then? The key concept is that of **relative existence**, which I will briefly explain.

This concept is simple and directly analogous to the transition in physics, dating back to Galileo, from absolute to relative properties. The most famous case is that of velocity. Velocity is inherently relative. There is no sense in speaking, as was done before Galileo, of velocity in absolute terms. Setting aside the question of whether a body's velocity is relative to other bodies or, as Newton thought, relative to absolute space, it is fair to say that a body has a different relative velocity for each body in the universe. For instance, the muffin in front of me has a relative velocity of zero with respect to the table and a relative velocity of approximately 3600 km/h with respect to the Earth's rotation.

This principle applies to all properties, not just velocity. Physics need not invoke absolute velocities, as every property manifests in relation to a specific context. For example, in a hypothetical universe containing only a single particle, it would make no sense to ask whether it is moving or stationary. However, if there are two or more particles, the question of velocity becomes meaningful because it expresses one particle's state relative to the others.

Typically, physics educators stop at velocity when discussing the shift from absolute to relative. While the relativity of velocity is taught in high school, all other physical properties are usually treated as absolute attributes of objects. Consequently, when the same objects or events are present differently in the lives of various people, the issue is resolved with the familiar dichotomy of existence versus appearance. It is said that the same object may appear differently to different subjects. This, however, multiplies ontological levels and bifurcates nature into reality and appearance.

This is unnecessary. By extending the idea that physical properties are relative and in act—for every physical property, from color to temperature, shape to weight—we can dispense with bifurcating nature because the world already contains all the properties we need.

The domain previously called “the experience of the world” is nothing more than a set of relative properties that do nothing but exist (or subsist), constituting a world in and of themselves. Consequently, each body creates a relative world because every other body has properties relative to it. In the case of human beings, the object relative to which this world of objects exists is, obviously, the body itself.

The body can be seen as the causal reference system that serves as the condition of existence for a whole set of relative properties. This introduces a new notion of **relative existence**.

To grasp this, imagine all the physical properties of the objects around us. We can immediately recognize that all the properties in our existence are relative to our body: the dimensions of objects, their velocity, their color, and so on. Any physical property that produces no effect on our body is absent from our existence. Conversely, every property is defined by its relation to the body.

Clearly, different bodies create different relative worlds. The notion of relative existence is immensely powerful, but these worlds are not subjective or phenomenological—they are fully relative physical worlds. For those still clinging to the supposed neutrality of the phenomenological attitude, consider velocity once again. In the case of relative velocity, no one feels the need to speak of apparent velocity versus real velocity. The speed recorded by a radar is no more real than the speed relative to a car being overtaken on the highway. Everything is relative; nothing is subjective or objective, phenomenal or natural.

The notion of relative existence resolves the problem of the bifurcation of nature and the opposition between subjective and objective. In the dominant tradition, subjective means being relative to a subject arbitrarily placed outside the physical world, while objective means being relative to another object. Relative existence transitions from arbitrary relativity to physical relativity, fully compatible with the causal closure of the physical world.

The great ontological advantage of relative existence over the dichotomy of phenomenal/natural is, of course, ontological parsimony. There is no longer a need to explain how the world appears to someone because there is no longer a need for the existence of an observer.

Relative existence, realized through a causal relationship with another object to which something exists relatively, is all that is needed.

5. Epoché turned upside-down

Having concluded a brief exposition of the MOI, I can better clarify its relationship with the phenomenological stance, as it is, in effect, a reversal of the traditional *epoché*. Whereas the *epoché* consisted in bracketing the natural object, the MOI brackets the subject.

Returning to Husserl, the classic *epoché* was a radicalization of the principle set forth in the *Logical Investigations* of 1900 (Husserl, 1900/2015), which held that every phenomenological description must proceed from a first-person perspective to ensure that the described object is represented exactly as it is experienced or intended by the subject. In this way, Husserl adopted the Cartesian indistinguishability of

dreaming, which would later evolve into analogous positions such as the so-called *Common Kind Assumption* in analytic philosophy. Similarly, according to Husserl, from the first-person perspective, there is no discernible difference between a veridical and a non-veridical case, simply because one cannot be the victim of a perceptual error and simultaneously detect it. In experience, whether veridical or non-veridical, a transcendent object appears to “constitute itself” in consciousness. For these reasons, Husserl insisted, in *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology* that in a properly phenomenological description, the existence of the object(s) that satisfies the content of the described intentional act must be “bracketed.” This means that the phenomenological description of a given act, and particularly the phenomenological specification of its intentional content, must not rely on the correctness of any existential assumption about the object(s) to which the act refers. The *epoché* requires the phenomenologist to bracket all existential assumptions about the external world simultaneously and at all times.

The MOI does precisely the opposite: it brackets the subject, the phenomenal experience, and the intentional act. For the MOI, only the relative object exists. Experiencing an object can thus be explained through identity with the existence of that object, rather than through its (phenomenal or intentional) presentation in the first person of a subject. The subject, as such, is no longer necessary. Only the relative object exists.

By rejecting the assumption that we are not the thing we find in our existence, we can fully embrace naturalism—not the “naive” version, but the relative version outlined in the previous chapter. There is no need for the world to appear, as in the *epoché*; the world exists, and it always exists relatively to another object. It exists relatively, but it exists.

The MOI is, in every respect, an upside-down *epoché*, requiring the bracketing of all assumptions about a presumed internal world or an experience distinct from existence. There is no longer any need to bracket existence—quite the opposite.

In this way, the MOI places us directly in the world, resolving the problem of our relationship with the world and its appearance. Indeed, we are not IN the world; we ARE the world, at least a relative world that exists in relation to our body.

From this perspective, phenomenology committed an unforgivable error: it reified a negation, the negation contained in the assumption that we are not the thing present in our existence and, therefore, that we are not a thing. Not being a thing meant being a phenomenon or an appearance. This is the absurd conclusion to which the phenomenological stance has accustomed us, and which the MOI seeks to rectify: there is no reason to reify non-existence by calling it a phenomenon, a self, consciousness, experience, or intentionality. The world is solely relative existence.

Let us also consider a comparison between the MOI and some contemporary articulations of phenomenology, particularly those of Dan Zahavi and Daniel Hutto. Both, albeit with different approaches, attempt to preserve the explanatory value of experience, understood as the foundation of our relationship with the world. However, this very centrality of experience ties them to an ontological framework that the MOI critiques as intrinsically dualistic or, at the very least, unnecessary.

Zahavi seeks to avoid taking on ontological debts and instead attempts to find a middle ground between classical dualism and materialist reductionism (Zahavi, 2014, 2019). Zahavi insists on the necessity of maintaining the phenomenon as the starting point for understanding subjective experience. For him, experience is not an abstraction but something fundamental that cannot be reduced to physical processes or mere objective descriptions. The notion of the “self-manifestation” of the self is central to his phenomenology: the self is the point from which every experience is articulated, a pre-reflective dimension that accompanies and unifies lived experience.

The MOI, in contrast, rejects this centrality of the self and subjectivity. There is no “self” accompanying experiences, nor a phenomenal dimension that must be distinguished from physical existence. According to the MOI, what Zahavi calls “self-manifestation” is a reification of a physical relationship between the body and surrounding objects, which requires no phenomenological or pre-reflective foundation. The MOI suggests that the sense of continuity of the self is nothing more than the relative existence of a body that serves as a reference point for a network of physical properties.

Another point of contrast concerns the concept of intentionality. Zahavi asserts that intentionality—the fact that every experience is always “of something”—distinguishes the phenomenon from nature, assuming a distinctly Brentanian position, which he could afford because he was a dualist. The MOI overturns this perspective, considering intentionality not as a property of experience but as a way to describe the physical relationship between objects. There is no “being of something” separate from the simple “being in relation to something.” This ontological simplification eliminates the need to postulate a separate phenomenal domain.

It is also interesting to compare the MOI with Daniel Hutto, who has outlined a perspective that diverges from both classical cognitivism and materialist reductionism (Hutto, 2000; Hutto & Myin, 2017). According to Hutto, experience and cognition cannot be explained in terms of mental representations or internal symbolic content. Instead, he proposes that the mind emerges from dynamic and pragmatic interactions between organism and environment. In this sense, Hutto’s

position can be seen as an enactivist variant of phenomenology, with roots in Merleau-Ponty.

The MOI shares Hutto's aversion to mental representations and symbolic content but diverges from his emphasis on the notion of interaction. For the MOI, there is no need to postulate that the mind emerges from interactions between organism and environment because there is no mind distinct from the existence of the objects themselves. When Hutto speaks of "engagement" with the world, he still presupposes a subject interacting with an object. The MOI, instead, argues that the relative object is the subject in that relationship. There is no "engagement" to explain, only the relative existence of a body that defines a world.

Furthermore, while Hutto seeks to preserve some space for subjective experience within his enactive framework, the MOI entirely eliminates the need for this dimension. Subjective experience, according to the MOI, is nothing more than a confused description of physical properties relative to a body. For example, what Hutto describes as "living an experience" is, in the MOI, simply the manifestation of a set of physical properties (colors, sounds, smells) relative to the body in question.

Both Zahavi and Hutto, despite their different approaches, share a fundamental problem according to the MOI: the attempt to salvage a dimension of experience that is irreducible to physics but does not imply dualism. This approach ends up implicitly creating an "ontological mess," introducing intermediate levels or vague concepts like "phenomenon" or "engagement" to avoid the difficulties of materialist reductionism without openly embracing dualism.

The MOI avoids these complications by proposing a radical ontological parsimony: everything that exists is a physical world made of relative properties. There is no need for a phenomenon, an experience, or a subject. The relationship between body and world is sufficient to explain everything we call perception, consciousness, or intentionality.

In conclusion, while Zahavi and Hutto remain anchored to the idea that experience is an inevitable starting point for understanding our relationship with the world, the MOI instead invites us to bracket not the existence of the world but the entire notion of experience. In this way, it liberates us from a dualistic vision and reconciles us with naturalism—not as reductionism, but as a relational and integrated vision of existence.

6. A new beginning

The path outlined in this article has led us to overturn one of the central assumptions of Western tradition: the separation between subject and world. We have seen how this dichotomy, seemingly self-evident, has generated countless

philosophical and scientific problems, relegating our existence to a position of estrangement from natural reality. From this fracture, theoretical constructions have proliferated that, rather than solving the problem, have crystallized it into increasingly elaborate and inaccessible forms. The idea of a self separate from the world has produced a bifurcation that not only renders basic problems, such as perceiving a muffin, insoluble, but has also fueled the proliferation of ontologically incoherent concepts like “experience,” “appearance,” or “intentionality.”

The Mind-Object Identity (MOI) proposal aims to address these issues at their root, eliminating the need for an “internal world” or an “appearance” opposed to natural reality. The notion of relative existence offers a key to understanding our place in the world without resorting to problematic dichotomies. We are not a separate subject observing an object; rather, we are an object among objects, a body that constitutes the reference point for a relative, physically determined, and ontologically economical world.

The reversal of the phenomenological *epoché* is a crucial step in this direction. Whereas Husserl and his successors proposed bracketing the existence of the natural world to focus on the phenomenon, the MOI invites us to do the opposite: to bracket the assumption that a separate subject or an experience distinct from existence exists. This shift in perspective allows us to overcome the limitations of both naive naturalism, which conceives the world in terms of absolute objects, and phenomenology, which reifies appearance without justifying it ontologically.

Accepting the notion of relative existence means abandoning the illusion of a separate self and reconciling ourselves with the world—not as a place where we are thrown, but as what we are. The world does not need to appear; it exists. And our position within it is not that of a detached observer but of a relative object, which, in its relationship with other objects, gives rise to a network of interdependent existences.

The MOI, therefore, is not merely a theory of consciousness but a proposal to rethink our entire relationship with reality—or rather, our presence within reality—as part of reality itself, not in relation to it. It is not about reducing our experience to mere material processes or denying the importance of what we call “experience.” Instead, it is about recognizing that experience is nothing more than a mode of relative existence: the way the world manifests itself relative to our body, without implying any separation or duality.

This perspective not only dissolves the problem of appearance but also offers us a vision of the world as a dynamic and intrinsically relational unity. In this way, the MOI returns us to the world, freeing us from the metaphysical prison of the subject, and allows us to fully embrace naturalism—not naive naturalism, but a relative naturalism founded on the interdependence of existences.

This paradigm shift invites a reassessment not only of the premises of cognitive sciences and philosophy of mind but also of our way of relating to the world, to things, and to ourselves. The word “experience” has so far played an absurd role; it is like a hippogriff—an animal that could not even exist. MOI puts an end to such an absurdity and places us back in a world of pure existence. In this sense, MOI puts forward an existential reduction, the *epoché* has been finally turned upside-down.

Summary

This article challenges the foundational assumption of Western thought that posits a separation between the subject and the external world—a dichotomy underpinning much of contemporary philosophy and cognitive science. This dualistic premise, which denies that the observer can be the observed, renders ordinary phenomena, such as perceiving a chocolate muffin, metaphysically problematic. Traditional phenomenology, exemplified by Husserl and its contemporary heirs like Zahavi and Hutto, attempts to address this issue by reifying experience as a primary domain distinct from the natural world. However, these approaches inadvertently introduce ontological complexity by perpetuating the bifurcation of nature into “phenomenal” and “real” domains.

The Mind-Object Identity (MOI) theory offers an alternative that dissolves this dualism. It posits that perception is not a relation between a subject and an object but the relative existence of the object itself within a physical framework. The MOI flips Husserl’s *epoché*, bracketing not the natural world but the subject and its presumed phenomenological interiority. By replacing the dualistic notion of “experience” with the concept of relative existence, the MOI provides a parsimonious ontology, reconciling naturalism with a relational understanding of reality. This paradigm invites a reevaluation of the human presence in the world—not as observers of it, but as integral parts of its relational existence.

Keywords: MOI, Mind-Object Identity, *Epoché*, Consciousness, Phenomenology, Intentionality, Self.

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Riccardo Manzotti, born 1969, Ph.D. in Robotics, is a Full Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at IULM University (Milan). He has been a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at MIT and a visiting professor at KAIST (South Korea) and UAEU (United Arab Emirates University). His research spans philosophy of mind, consciousness studies, cognitive science, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence, with a focus on challenging traditional notions of consciousness. He is best known for developing the Mind-Object Identity Theory (MOI), a radical rethinking of the relationship between the mind and the external world. He is the author of *The Spread Mind: Why Consciousness and the World Are One* and has published extensively in academic journals on perception, intentionality, and the ontological status of information.

Address: Department of Business, Law, Economics and Consumer Behaviour – Faculty of Communication, IULM University, Milan, Italy

E-mail: riccardo.manzotti@iulm.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-8634-5250