

**THE DUALITY OF SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY: THE EFFECT  
ON SOCIETY**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by:

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Duality of Subjectivity and Objectivity: The Effect on Society

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For this project, I will build upon previous work on phenomenology and the interconnectedness of the world. By utilizing past works on phenomenology, the relation of space, and subjectivity vs. objectivity, I will analyze the way our experience and relation to the world affect humanity as society as a whole. The way the humans interact with the world and the environment they are placed in, is unique based on the individual. However, there is this universality and objectivity that humanity experience. This universality amongst humans allows us to relate to one another, even with completely different experiences. By utilizing the work that Husserl and Heidegger have done relating to this subject matter, I will be able to expand upon this idea of the connection between humanity and the environment, how that affects the experiences humans have, and how the interconnectedness affects the society at large.

## SECTION I

### PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

In order to accurately discuss these dynamics, we must clearly understand the terms used. Spatiality is defined as: any property relating to or occupying space (“Spatiality”). I will define property as: an attribute, quality, or characteristic of something in order to make the definition of spatiality clearer. I will define space as: the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move (“Space”). Then the definition of place, which is: a particular position or point in space (“Place”). Spatiality is defined as: any attribute, quality, or characteristic of something relating to or occupying the dimensions of height, depth, and width within which all things exist and move (“Spatiality”). Therefore, if John Doe occupies (or even relates to) the three-dimensional universe, he possesses spatiality. Assuming John Doe is a structured collection of atoms and his being is not scattered across the universe to be found in particles to piece together, he is located in a place within space. He is located in a particular position or point in space, and unless John Doe stays perfectly still for his entire existence, that particular position or point he is in will change as he moves about the three-dimensional universe he exists in. There is another dimension that needs to be taken into account: time. In order for movement to occur, time has to be a factor. Time is defined as: a nonspatial continuum that is measured in terms of events which succeed one another from past through present to future (“Time”). So not only is John Doe subject to a three-dimensional universe, but a four dimensional universe. Even if John Doe was able to stay put in one particular spot for the entirety of his life, he is still subject to time and the changes that occur as events around him affect the surroundings which he is subjective to. Thus leads us into subjectivity vs. objectivity.

## SECTION II

### SUBJECTIVITY VS. OBJECTIVITY

Husserl asks the question, “Can we be satisfied simply with the notion that human beings are *subjects for the world* (the world which for consciousness is their world) and at the same time are objects in this world?” (Husserl 180). He also states that we have “...’subjectivity *in the world as object,*” (Husserl 181). These two points bring up a much-needed distinction about the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity and how almost everything is both subjective and objective simultaneously. Subjective is defined as: based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes, and opinions; dependent on the mind or on an individual’s perception for its existence (“Subjective”), and objective is defined as: not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts; not dependent on the mind for existence (“Objective”). As I previously stated, it would seem that something that is both subjective and objective simultaneously is paradoxical, and it is if one is using that same reference point. However, when changing the point of reference one can see how both something is objective and subjective at the same time. Before we can discuss this, we must first address how we, as humans, experience this objective and subjective dynamic.

Heidegger states that “...’being’ is the most universal and the emptiest concept,” (Heidegger 1). For we do not simply exist within the world, but experience it. We must take “being” to mean more than the simple fact of our existence, but of our experience. We are constantly at the expense of the environment that we occupy within at any given point in time, for the body that we possess is how we experience the world. “The soul (of the human being) is in a certain way a being. The ‘soul’ which constitutes the being of human being discovers in its

ways to be - αἴσθησις and νόησις – all beings with regard to their thatness and whatness, that is to say, always also in their being,” (Heidegger 13). For simplistic and illustrative purposes, I will consider the soul to be what actually experiences events and the body to be the medium/vessel as to how we experience things. Meaning that external stimuli is mediated through the bodily senses, where it reaches the soul which is what truly experiences the world. The body is a physical object that occupies space, and as long as all sensory mechanisms are functioning, we are subjected to the environment around the particular point within time that we occupy. The stimuli that the physical body picks up is then taken and experienced by the soul. I want to note that this extends to more than just the simple brush of the wind or the feeling of rain, this extends to various events and scenarios that play out in our everyday lives. “What does science have to say about reason and unreason or about us men as subjects of this freedom? The mere science of bodies clearly has nothing to say; it abstracts from everything subjective,” (Husserl 6), what Husserl means by this is that by taking the body out of it’s subjectiveness, one loses a critical position needed for understanding humanistic qualities. Reducing a human to their just “the body”, you lose a bigger aspect of humanism and the subjective/objective relationship. One cannot just have the body and the scientific functions because you lose the value and meaning of the stimulus acquired, but you also cannot have just a soul as then you cannot have any true experiences. Both the tangible/physical body and the metaphysical soul is needed in order to not only be, but be in the world.

Now, the subjectivity and objectivity duality of humanity is possible due to the shift in reference point. When one looks at the human, we are dependent on space and time. We are subjective to the events that occur around us in the space we occupy, as time passes on. Yet, we are also objective in the world as humans because we exist within space and time, and space

and time will continue onward regardless of our consciousness. The world has an effect on us and we have an effect on the world, both the world and us being simultaneously subjective and objective. Husserl brings to attention this "...juxtaposition (of) "subjectivity *in* the world as object: and at the same time "conscious subject *for* the world," (Husserl 181). He sees dichotomy occurring due to the lack of "...the phenomenon of the change of signification of [the form] 'I,'" (Husserl 182). The question that arises out of this for Husserl is:

...who are *we*, as subjects performing the meaning – and validity – accomplishment of universal constitution – as those who, in community, constitute the world as a system of poles, as the intentional structure of community life? Can "we" mean "we human beings," human beings in the natural-objective sense, i.e., as real entities in the world? But are these real entities not themselves "phenomena" and as such themselves object-poles and subject matter for inquiry back into the correlative intentionalities of which they are the poles, through whose function they have, and have attained, their ontic meaning? (Husserl 182).

This question is critical to this dynamic, however, I believe the "how we are" has yet to be adequately discussed and addressed, and more relevant to the dynamic of the world and humanity that I am questioning. For the *who are we* discusses the essence of humanity, but the *how we are* is observing the actual relationship that humanity has with the events occurring within space and time and our experiences from them.

## **SECTION III**

### **EVENTS AND EXPERIENCES**

Moving forward, I will use the term “being” to describe humanity’s role in the world as “event + experience.” The events that unfold around us within space and time are what we are objective towards. The events that take place are not dependent on our consciousness, they will occur with or without consciousness present. This is also regardless of whether the event was caused by an action with human consciousness as the root, because if the event is isolated to that event itself (without the cause), it is objective. The event is still occurring within space and time and does not rely on human consciousness to perceive that it is happening. Experience happens when we perceive and are aware of an event that has occurred. Our experiences are subjective in that it is due to our consciousness and previous experiences that lead to the interpretation of the event witnessed. This dual nature of the objective event and the subjective experience(s) is not only what constitutes the unique human experience, but also plays a huge role in the way we interact within environments and how much we utilize/do not utilize our rationale.

The environment in which humanity resides is a fundamental aspect in how we conduct ourselves. Our being in space and time is both a combination of our experiences and the impact of the space around us. Humanity moves around the world, impacting the space around us while the world not only is affected by us, but also affects us. A functioning human is able to perceive, sense, and are conscious of their presence within space and time, regardless if they are actively acknowledging this, they still take in events occurring around them and gain experience(s) from them. These experiences gained from life affect the individual by initially shaping their views and perspectives on the environment around them.



Humanity is subjective to the environment around, and events that occur within that space cause them to form an experience from said event. This experience can then affect their worldview in all sorts of aspects depending on the context of the event and the experience gained from it. A simple example is a child near a hot stove, if he touches the hot stove that is glowing red he becomes injured. The event of the stove being hot and the event of the child touching it caused the child to have an experience of pain. He can now realize that if the stove-top is red, then that means the stove is hot and he should avoid coming into contact with it. However, one day the stove top may be turned on but not hot enough to become red in color, yet still hot enough to cause pain when touched. The boy then touches the stove that he assumes to be safe and proceeds to burn himself. He can then understand that the stove does not have to be red for it to be hot, the stove just needs to be turned on and heated to a certain degree. This example illustrates how humanity builds similar experiences upon one another, how we connect our experiences together in order to gain an understanding of the world and what each individual's reality is.

## **SECTION IV**

### **THE INDIVIDUAL AND THEIR EXPERIENCES**

As an individual moves throughout life, their experiences accumulate. This accumulation of various experiences help shape and form the reality that the individual lives within. Each individual has unique life experiences, which can cause different interpretations of any one event. These experiences lead to one's values, morals, beliefs, etc. A single event that is experienced by many people is going to leave each individual with a different, unique interpretation of the experience based on what they have previously experienced in the past. The more a similar event occurs, the more familiar one becomes of the outcome and the familiar experience is reiterated to the individual. This process leads the individual to become comfortable and because of this repetition, ideas, morals, and opinions can become solidified. Less reasoning has to be used and the individual does not feel the need to question their experiences and reality, however, this comfortability can become dangerous. When one becomes so comfortable within their experiences they stop questioning, one stops living a fulfilling life.

## **SECTION V**

### **AFFECTS ON SOCIETY**

One's reality is based upon their collection of experiences. If humanity ceases to question their experiences, then morals, religious views, political views, etc., will begin to lack questioning as well, and society as a whole will become riddled with ideologies based upon experiences and not reason. This subjectivity can prevent us from seeking the objective truths within the four-dimensional world we inhabit. Experiences alone are too unreliable to base any personal beliefs or views upon, as experiences are dependent on past experiences as well as on the event that triggered said experience. However, reason alone also falls short of being a reliable way of being. Rationality can be utilized to argue almost any point. As long as the argument is logically sound, the argument stands reasonable. By solely relying on logic and pure reason, stalemates arise because all sides of an argument can be reasonably argued. If society relies on experience, we risk living in only the subjective and ignoring the objective, however, if we rely on reason, we risk living in a society where nothing gets accomplished.

By utilizing both reason and experience, we are able to rationally examine the experiences that we have and discover if the objectivity of the events and space and time reasonably match the subjective experiences and the conclusions drawn from them. This is not to say that one should be questioning any and all events and the experiences drawn from them, but instead to analyze why one's values and beliefs are what they are; what exactly caused them to believe in this religion, have these moral values, align with this political party, etc. By reflecting back upon experiences with a rational mind, one can either confirm the validity of the conclusion

that they received from the event experienced or they can realize that the conclusion they arrived to was unreasonable and change their initial perspective.

By doing this, it validates that what we have experienced is not only reasonable, but that it aligns with what the individual finds to be true and it is these personal truths that are as close to the objective truths of the world that we can get to. Our experiences shape the way that we view reality and by insuring that we are actually experiencing a reality that is of sound reason to the individual, we can not only live in a reality that we are confident of and that is fulfilling, but one that on a societal level is productive and progressive.

The consistent questioning of experiences in relation to internal values, views, and beliefs allows one to reaffirm, grow, and change with the environment, space, and time around them. This drives innovation, progress, and development within the individual and if taken to humanity as a whole, it will drive society forward as well. By utilizing the duality of subjectivity and objectivity in our being, we can grow as a society by looking at our reality and experiences and evaluating them with a rational mind in order to live a life of a confidence and fulfillment.

## **SECTION VI**

### **NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR: POINTS TO PONDER**

I believe the way philosophy moves forward is via discussion. The purpose of this section is to encourage the reader to think beyond what they have read and pose questions, challenge what I have said, add your own input, etc. During the presentation of this paper, I opened the floor up for discussion with these two questions:

1) As a society at large, should we advocate the questioning of your experiences/reality?

2) If so, how should we go about doing so?

Utilize these two questions as a jump start to the discussion. Think for yourself, do not just take my word for it. Question what I have stated, form your own opposing or agreeing opinion, create a totally new perspective. Whatever it may be, it will be adding to the discussion of the questions posed throughout this paper and getting closer to what the answers are.

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