

A Natural Ontology of Experience Without Reification

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1. Framing

Experience arises from living biological processes. Consciousness is not an extra layer of reality added to life but one of life's own operations — an evolved, integrative process that helps an organism anticipate and regulate its conditions.

I'm not claiming an ultimate truth about consciousness; rather, I'm describing the conditions that allow awareness to appear. Any explanation, even this one, is itself a construction. What matters is avoiding the common mistake of turning concepts into entities that supposedly exist apart from the processes they describe.

2. Biology as Ontological Grounding

A biological ontology begins with what can't be denied: living systems exist. From this, consciousness follows as an expression of life's organization, not as something separate from it. The brain and body continuously map sensory inputs, internal states, and predictive models of the world to maintain equilibrium.

When sensory and cognitive activity quiets — as in meditation — the system builds a simpler, lower-resolution predictive map. Consciousness doesn't become "pure awareness"; it simply contains **less constructed content**. The quiet and openness that follow aren't metaphysical revelations. They're the natural phenomenology of a brain doing less work.

This is why such states feel peaceful. They reflect the organism's return to metabolic and neurological balance.

3. Phenomenology: Knowing as Construction

All knowing is constructed. The mind interprets through conditioning, habit, and biological necessity. Even what we call "direct experience" is an interpretation — a temporary, adaptive model generated by the nervous system.

To claim "I experienced suchness" is already to miss it. *Suchness* isn't an experience; it's a word pointing to the impossibility of freezing experience into a thing. When one looks closely, what appears as stable "things" dissolve into changing processes. Phenomenology, practiced with honesty, doesn't find an ultimate ground. It reveals how the very search for ground is itself a mental activity.

4. The Buddha's Practical Project

Early Buddhism was never metaphysical. It was diagnostic and pragmatic — a method for understanding the causes of discontent and how to release them.

The Buddha described *dukkha* as friction or tension that arises from craving and clinging — not from ignorance of some metaphysical truth, but from misunderstanding the conditional nature of experience. Seeing impermanence and dependent arising clearly weakens craving. The purpose of insight isn't to discover an ultimate essence like "emptiness" or "Buddha-nature," but to loosen our grasp on any view that tries to define ultimate reality.

5. Against Reification

To reify is to mistake a description for a thing. Much of Mahāyāna thought — or what I call **Mahayanism** — fell into this trap. The Buddha used *emptiness* as a way of seeing: that all things lack self-nature. Later thinkers turned it into a **doctrine about what reality is** — an ontological claim that "everything *is* emptiness."

That shift replaced investigation with belief. Likewise, modern philosophers like Thomas Metzinger sometimes reify ideas such as "minimal phenomenal experience" or "pure awareness," treating them as discoveries rather than as mental configurations produced when sensory input wanes.

Both moves abandon the Buddha's insight that **no concept can stand as final**. Clinging to the notion of emptiness is just another form of clinging.

6. A Naturalized Understanding of Experience

A natural ontology of experience rests on simple observations:

1. **Consciousness is constructed** by living systems, not revealed by mystical means.
2. **Every model is provisional**. Experience is always partial, filtered, and context-dependent.
3. **Wisdom lies in recognizing this**, not in reaching for some ultimate state.
4. **Physiology mirrors understanding**. When sensory and cognitive reactivity quiet, the parasympathetic system engages: cortisol drops; serotonin, GABA, endorphins, and oxytocin rise. The body registers safety and balance, which we feel as spaciousness and well-being.
5. That balance is not enlightenment. It's **homeostasis experienced from the inside**.

The pleasant stillness of meditation is the organism's way of signaling that its predictive models and reality are momentarily aligned. Nothing supernatural occurs; the brain has simply stopped fighting itself.

7. Living Without Reification

To live without reification means to see all concepts — even Buddhist ones — as tools, not truths. It means recognizing that our descriptions of mind, body, and world are provisional stories we tell to navigate existence, not mirrors of reality itself.

Clarity, not metaphysics, is the goal. The path is not toward transcendence but toward understanding: seeing how the mind constructs, loosening its grip on certainty, and responding wisely to changing conditions.

This is, I believe, what the Buddha actually taught — a path of liberation through insight into process, not belief in essence.