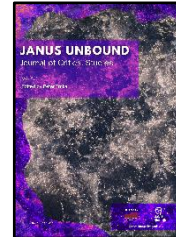


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Continuing the Conversation, between a Philosopher and an Artist

uminoko

From: artist@uminoko.ca
To: philosopher@uminoko.ca
Date: Sunday, June 15, 2025 at 1:32 PM
Subject: Continuing the Conversation

Dear Philosopher,

Thank you for agreeing to continue the conversation that has been developing between us. And thank you *Janus* for allowing it to take such a form. An email exchange is the next logical step; less ephemeral as the spoken word gives way to the written, and more concrete without losing the essential quality of what this is: two friends inquiring into the nature of the images and how they be used. If anything more substantial develops then let it be on this foundation; Uminoko is nothing more than its relationships.

In the context of this conversation, it's been fruitful because we both bring different understanding of the image. As the artist, the image is the air I breathe; my understanding comes through an intuition built on direct experience. This growing conversation helps me better describe my own work—an important financial skill. But what's more interesting is that it secures and cements abstract concepts that can then guide and refine my own personal inquiries. That is my position.

We have already briefly spoke about one of your strengths is being able to describe the ideas we exchange using the rigour and precision of Philosophy—specifically Phenomenology. Hopefully we can get to that point in this email exchange. But first, I want to better understand your personal motivations for continuing this conversation... why think the image? Why still the stream of consciousness?

There's more I'd like to say—specifically on my own work—but this feels like a good place to leave off.

Yours truly,
Photographer

From: philosopher@uminoko.ca
To: artist@uminoko.ca
Date: Tuesday, June 24, 2025 at 1:39
Subject: Continuing the Conversation

Hi Photographer

As we walked through the woods and you took pictures of the streams we encountered, I was reminded of Paul Natorp's famous critique that Edmund Husserl's phenomenological *epoché* "stills the stream of consciousness." A metaphor I had long encountered in texts suddenly became visible. The stream, which flows freely to the naked eye, appears frozen in the photographs you captured. This raises several questions about the function of the photograph and what is made manifest within it. Before offering my thoughts and speculation, your curiosity about this metaphor deserves to be situated in its historical context.

If you recall from the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl claims that consciousness is always directed toward an object. This "aboutness" or directedness is the defining feature of the fundamental principle of phenomenology, namely intentionality. For Husserl, intentionality is a basic fact of consciousness and functions as its first principle. It can also be analyzed into distinct components. For example, when we saw that beautiful rocky cliffside, the act-quality is perceiving. More generally, this refers to the kind of conscious act we perform (i.e., thinking x, imagining x, remembering x, and so on). The act-matter refers to the specific way we intend the cliffside (i.e., x as it is thought, the imagined x, the remembered x, and so on). For instance, I notice that it is rugged and too dangerous to climb. Most importantly, the intentional object is the cliffside itself, the thing to which our consciousness is directed. This object constitutes the meaningful content that shapes how the cliff appears to us in that moment.

With the publication of his next major work, *Ideas I*, Husserl proposes a radically new method of bracketing or suspending our "natural attitude" (part of the characterization of intentionality and experience in the *Logical Investigations*) to focus on the pure phenomena of consciousness. In other words, Husserl wanted to know what the essence of consciousness is when it is removed from the contingencies, flux, and directedness towards objects in the world. Instead, he wanted to know about consciousness itself as the intentional object, so to speak. The success of Husserl's ambitions, however, depends on whether it is possible to investigate subjectivity reflectively. And further, can reflection through the phenomenological *epoché* give us access to the original experiential dimension, or is there reason to suspect that experience is radically altered when reflected upon?

Natorp certainly had his doubts. His critique, developed in *Allgemeine Psychologie nach kritischer Methode*, draws attention to the uncertainty of several phenomenological principles, especially the central role of reflection as the founda-

tion of the transcendental-phenomenological method. Husserl's *epoché* claims to describe the structures of experience in self-reflective immediacy. Pure consciousness is said to present in an absolute manner, which allows its essential features to be clearly defined. Yet Natorp argued that the moment we attempt to think of the subject or of experience in its purity, we turn subjectivity into an object and cease to think of it as subject at all. In other words, the act of reflecting on experience does not grant access to subjectivity itself. Instead, it confronts us with a representation, an image of experience. The main thrust of Natorp's critique is not that the subject even renders a distorted or derivative account of experience. His point is that we never access the lived experience of subjectivity at all. What we encounter through reflection is an objectified version of subjectivity, which should not be confused with the original, functioning subjectivity that performs the reflection. For this reason, we should resist the idea that reflection provides access to genuine experience. The notion of unmediated access to authentic subjectivity is, in Natorp's view, an unreachable ideal. He writes that the moment consciousness expresses itself, it leaves its domain behind and enters the realm of objects. In doing so, we once again miss what originally drew our interest. If I recall correctly, Dan Zahavi articulates this point quite clearly in his paper "Subjectivity and Self-hood: Investigating the first-person perspective." Reflection is necessarily objectifying. It destroys the vitality of lived experience. It petrifies the stream and transforms experiences into fragmented and momentary objects. In other words, it objectifies the ongoing stream of conscious experience.

Natorp elaborates this argument in *Allgemeine Psychologie* (102-3), and I have loosely translated the relevant passage below:

If one were to attempt, if it were even possible, to grasp the content of immediate experience in itself purely as it is, far from every expression, every judgment, every intention, would one not nevertheless be forced to delimit it, to raise it above the mesh of experiencing, whether by the pointing of a finger or a blink of an eye? Would one not be compelled to artificially still and interrupt the continuous stream of becoming, which is surely how inner life presents itself? Would one not isolate the individual finding, fixate it with isolation in mind, and sterilize it as the anatomist does with his specimen? But does one not thereby detach it from the experienced, from the subjective, and thus make it into an object? In the end, it seems that one never grasps the subjective in itself as such. On the contrary, in order to grasp it scientifically, one must strip it of its subjective character. One kills subjectivity in order to dissect it and believes that the life of the soul is on display in the result of the dissection.

Your photograph seemingly has nothing to do with consciousness. And yet I am curious: What do you think you captured in your photograph of the stream? If we take Natorp's critique loosely as a guide, did you capture the essence or the form, in the Aristotelian sense, of the stream? Or did you create something entirely new? Do you think the depictive function of the image and the actual object, the stream itself, merge into one coherent perception, or is there always a gap between them?

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Thank you, as always, for your curiosity. I hope your sincerity in art and the trust you place in your intuitions continue to guide your appetite for thinking.

Yours truly,
Philosopher

From: artist@uminoko.ca
To: philosopher@uminoko.ca
Date: Sunday, June 15, 2025 at 1:32 PM
Subject: Continuing the Conversation

Dear Philosopher,

Thank you for your thorough and well-laid reply; for myself, the project has already been realized. Uminoko seeks to reach new territories through genuine collaboration; my tools were previously unfit for the terrain ahead, but with your mapping and restructuring, I can now travel to places previously unreachable. So, let's go.

I will begin with this personal definition: *Images are fruits of labour, and this labour is the life of the Artist.* As an apple seemingly can be consumed as just an apple (apple as object), it cannot be divorced from the sun, the rain, the soil, and all other invisible hands that went into making it fit for consumption (apple as subject). The image is a fruit; it, too, has the same duality as the apple. If one is serious about being an Artist, it requires a disciplined freedom; when confronted with a fork in the road, one must walk down both paths. It is not about comparing which stance is better; rather, it is strictly about seeing; each path has its own fruits, but the Artist is not the consumer, they are the harvester. These fruits can only be harvested through the experience that is unique to the path that was walked upon. There is the image as an object, the one experienced by the viewer, the apple in your hands, but then there is the image as a subject, the one experienced by the photographer, the apple from seed to mouth. I begin with this analogy because not only will it help me to answer some of the questions you've laid out, but my hope is that it will help establish a connection between the image and consciousness.

The photograph in question is quite literally the stilling of a stream. If we look at it as an art object, divorced from sun, rain and soil that spurred it into existence, then yes, this image objectifies the stream. In this case, I would have to agree with Natorp; the image of the stream is not a distorted version of the stream, it creates an instance of the stream, but it is not the flowing, rushing stream that one experiences. The stream does not exist in the instant; the stream cannot be severed from time. When we look at the image as an object, Natorp's view holds; the photo does not grant the viewer access to the subjective experience of the stream. But it does grant access to something else.

Walter Benjamin highlights something of this in his seminal essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”; he describes how the advent of film brings new forms of subjectivity: “With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended ... a different nature opens itself up to the camera” (Benjamin, 16). The photograph is not an image of experience, but it creates a new possibility for subjectivity. More could be said here, but I must continue onwards; the other path is beckoning me. The question then becomes: can such a representation bring one to the essence of the thing it is representing? Is Husserl’s ideal unreachable?

There is a certain optimism that is fundamental to the pursuit of Art; it requires an openness to the idea of magic, and the willingness to attempt to cast one’s own spells. Just as the Alchemist believes an elixir or immortality can be created out of earthly substances, the Artist attempts to capture the essence of a thing by transmitting the immaterial into a material form. It is this desire that is at the root of my own drive to take a photo. To me, this is quite like Husserl’s project of hoping to arrive at a direct experience of consciousness via reflection. When analyzed, it is easy to find the flaws of such an approach, but this would be a mistake—a tree is known only by its fruit. What we are talking about here are religious tenets: “A religious tenet is not a factual hypothesis, but something which affects our thoughts and actions in a different way. The meaning of a religious proposition is not a function of what would have to be the case if it were true, but a function of the difference it makes to the lives of those who maintain it” (Gudmunsen, 102). I am not here to defend Husserl’s project or to open different discussion points; I am trying to answer your question of whether the image and the stream merge into one coherent perception. The image as the art object and the stream do not merge into one; but in my experience, the realm of subjectivity created by the image, paired with the quest of the Artist, are able to create an experience of union. This is the highest potential of Art, of the image; it is called Yoga.

In Yoga, one is encouraged to trust their experience, their personal subjectivity. That is what informs me when I say it is possible for there to be one coherent perception of pure unbridled consciousness. In the early stages of Bhakti Yoga—the yoga of love and devotion—an object is necessary for the practitioner to direct their energy towards. This is worship. One may choose any deity as a substitute for God (or consciousness in the Husserlian context), if one remembers that this objectification is not the real thing—it is only a channel (essentially Natorp’s critique). In my experience as an Artist, it is the image—or maybe more accurately the frame—that becomes the object for this love to flow through. Just as reflection is integral to the practice of Philosophy, the image is integral to the quest of the Artist. The gap is almost always there, but there are these rare moments of unified sight when it vanishes and the action of taking the photo flows effortlessly. To say anything more would be beyond the scope of Philosophy. Yet Philosophy can bring us there. Ironic and paradoxical; just as the image is.

It is this experience that I try to transmit into the finished photo; the essence I am trying to capture is myself. While it is not my place to judge how effective

Continuing the Conversation

I am at doing this, I do know this ability grows with time, persistence and practice—as do these experiences of pure consciousness. To capture the essence of an object such as a stream, that takes great skill in both perception and craft. I don't think I am there yet, but I do hope to do such a thing one day; until then, I can't tell you whether one can capture the essence of the stream by taking its photo. Is this question that different from asking if one can arrive at pure consciousness through reflection? Is the image not a useful model in this endeavour?

Thank you again; what I enjoy most about Philosophy is the feeling that comes after doing the work and emptying oneself of the ideas that were previously unrealized—your guidance and questions allowed me to do this. At the least, the image is a good excuse to drive out of the city, walk through the woods, and witness the crashing of the waves against those rocks. For if you truly want to know the stream, you will just have to jump in and swim.

Best,
Artist

Biography

We are **uminoko** (u-me-new-co). uminoko is a network of writers, painters, photographers, philosophers, etc. We are growing, and hope for an opportunity to continue to do so. What we seek is a new standard of collaboration, one in which identities have surrendered to roles and roles towards goals. What unites us is that we share a common hope, although it is too early to express it, we welcome any chance to take form and try and do so—its how we grow.

Today is for tomorrow; and tomorrow can be seen with shining ocean eyes.

Until then.

uminoko • 海の子 • ocean child

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Figure 1. Untitled colour photo by uminoko