

The Flesh of the Net

Phenomenology as a Description Language for the Vacuum

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1. The net, and the problem it creates for language

Start with the picture.

The universe is a net. Not a fabric, not a foam. A net, the kind a fisherman knots by hand.

The knots are matter. The meshes are what we have been calling empty space. A mesh closes on itself, so one mesh is 2π . A half knot does not exist. You can tie one turn or two turns, never one and a half. The net counts in whole numbers.

A knot holds without glue. Nothing is added to make it stay. The strand simply returns to itself, and the return is what holds.

Pull on one knot and the whole net feels it. There is no local event in a net. Tension travels.

A net can be strung taut or left slack. Taut, it is stiff and rings. Slack, it is soft and absorbs. Same net, different state.

And we are not looking at the net from outside. We are the fish. We live inside the meshes, made of the same strand.

That last sentence is where the trouble begins.

If everything is one strand, there are no longer two separate things. A cause arrow needs two things: one here, one there, and a direction between them. In a one-strand picture the arrow has nothing to stand on. It has nowhere to start and nowhere to point.

So the ordinary sentence of science stops working. "X causes Y" cannot be said, because X and Y are not two.

What is left is not nothing. Four kinds of statement survive.

Selection by fit: only what returns in phase remains. Nothing is pushed into existence. What does not close simply does not persist.

Identity across scale: the same winding, found again at another depth. Not a copy. The same thing, seen deeper.

Constitutive relation: two quantities that are one quantity written twice. They move together. There is no arrow between them, because there is no between.

Correspondence: two regions of the net in the same state. They agree without signalling.

Together these make a language of description, not of explanation. To use it, you must be able to say where in the net you are looking, and how deep. Describing at the right winding depth takes the place of explaining.

Building such a language from nothing would take a century.

It has already been built once. It was built by people who never heard of a vacuum model. They called it phenomenology.

2. How Being came apart

For twenty-four centuries, Being was one word. It meant: that which is. It had no parts.

Then it came apart, in one lifetime, and the pieces turned out to be structured.

Franz Brentano started it. He wrote his dissertation on the several meanings of the word *being* in Aristotle. His point was philological. His consequence was not.

Edmund Husserl was his student. Husserl did something nobody had done before him with any rigour: he studied his own consciousness, and used that study as the ground of his philosophy. Earlier philosophers built systems of abstract concepts and strung them together as they saw fit. Husserl looked instead.

What he found he called essence perception. It is the direct grasp of the *kind* of a thing.

His own example: a lion comes out of the jungle at you. You have never seen a lion, never heard of one. You do not need a second lion to compare it to. You do not need a definition. The kind is given at once, in the perception itself. Induction and deduction come afterwards, and they work on what essence perception has already delivered.

That is the first result worth holding on to. There is a reading of kinds that runs *ahead* of inference. It is not a shortcut and not a guess. It is a separate faculty, and it comes first.

Martin Heidegger took Husserl's method and turned it on Being itself. In *Being and Time* he split it in two.

Pure Being is the frozen kind. Parmenides described it: Being as a monolith, unchanging. You relate to it by pointing. You point at a pencil, name it, and hold it still in language.

Process Being is the flowing kind. Heraclitus described it: you cannot step into the same river twice. You relate to it by grasping. You pick up the pencil and write, and while writing you forget the pencil entirely.

Two kinds of Being, two ways of standing toward the world. Once there were two, the question was open: how many are there?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty found the third. At the end of *Phenomenology of Perception* he noticed that being-in-the-world can expand.

His examples are physical. A blind man with a stick does not feel the stick. He feels the pavement, at the far end of the stick. An organist rehearsing in an unfamiliar church does not calculate the new stops. After an hour the instrument has been absorbed. The body has grown into it.

Neither pointing nor grasping covers this. Something has been taken *in hand* and has become part of the person. Merleau-Ponty called it the expansion of being-in-the-world. Later he called it Hyper Being.

Emmanuel Levinas added a fourth posture, and it is the gentlest one in the whole tradition: bearing. A child bears up under the mother's attention, and the mother bears the child. Neither is acting on the other. Both are carrying.

So the postures run: pointing, grasping, taking in hand, bearing.

Jacques Derrida took the third kind and made a career of it under another name: *différance*, differing and deferring at once. Heidegger had reached the same place by another road and wrote Being with a line struck through it. Michel Henry reached it from Meister Eckhart.

Then Merleau-Ponty went one step further, and this is the step that matters most here.

He asked what remains *after* the third kind has done its work — after the standing oppositions of Process Being and Nothingness have cancelled each other. He called the remainder Wild Being, in homage to Lévi-Strauss's savage mind.

If Hyper Being is the expansion of being-in-the-world, Wild Being is its contraction. The two are a breathing pair.

He named two things at that level. The flesh, and the chiasm.

The flesh is what is left when the cancellation is complete. It is not matter and not mind. It is the single stuff of which both the seer and the seen are folds.

The chiasm is the reversibility inside that stuff. Your right hand touches your left. Which one is touching? Both, and it flips. The seer is inside the visible. The excluded middle is simply not in force here.

He did not finish. He died in a car accident in 1961, and *The Visible and the Invisible* was published from the manuscript and his working notes. Nobody has completed it since.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari took up Wild Being and built the rhizome from it: a network with no individuals, only connections.

Kent Palmer spent decades on the synthesis nobody else attempted — how the kinds of Being hold together as one structure. He added a fifth, Ultra Being, and argued that the series terminates there rather than running on forever.

3. Six places where the two pictures land on the same spot

None of these people were describing a vacuum. That is precisely what makes the agreement worth looking at.

Essence perception is reading at a winding depth

Husserl found a reading of kinds that precedes inference. The net asks for exactly that. To describe a region of the net you must first see *which* winding you are looking at, and how deep. That reading is not deduced from anything below it. It is taken directly.

Husserl not only noticed this faculty. He spent thirty years developing a discipline for training it, and that discipline is documented. It is the part of the tradition that is directly usable rather than merely agreeable.

Hyper Being is what does not fit

This is the correlate I would have missed on my own, and it is the sharpest of the five.

Resonance is selective. Very many conceivable windings never return in phase, and so are simply not there. What stands is shaped by what was excluded.

Hyper Being is the play of difference and absence that unsettles simple presence. Read against the net, it is the gap between the conceivable and the phase-admissible. The missing possibility is not a hidden object somewhere else. It is constitutive of the trajectory that does stand.

That is a *selection by fit* statement, and it needs no arrow.

Hyper Being is also the medium, and it has an older name

Palmer identifies Hyper Being with Derrida's *différance*, with Heidegger's crossed-out Being, and — this is the interesting one — with what Plato calls the third kind of Being in the *Timaeus*.

Plato's third kind is the *chōra*: the receptacle. It is not a thing and not a form. It is that in which things come to be. It has no character of its own, because any character would show up in everything it received. It is knowable only by a kind of bastard reasoning, as in a dream.

Read that against a net that is nowhere visible and everywhere constitutive. The *Timaeus* is not a distant analogy. It is the same object, described in 360 BCE without a number attached.

The two readings of Hyper Being are one reading. What excludes is what constitutes. A medium with no character of its own is exactly a medium that admits some windings and refuses others.

The chiasm is a one-strand statement

This is the closest fit in the whole tradition.

The flesh is one stuff. The seer is a fold of it, the seen is another fold, and they are reversible. There is no gap across which an arrow could run, because there is no gap.

That is what a net says. Fish and net, knot and mesh, observer and observed: same strand, different windings.

Merleau-Ponty arrived there by studying his own hands. The net arrives there by counting turns. The statement is the same statement.

The knot is a net one rung down

A knot at one depth is a complete net at the depth below.

A molecule is a whole made of atomic knots, and a part of a cell. A person is a whole made of biological systems, and a part of a group. Nothing changes about the thing when you shift which of the two you are looking at. Both are true at once.

Arthur Koestler named this in 1967 and called it the holon. He gave it the face of Janus, looking two ways at the same time: down, where it is a whole, and up, where it is a part. Palmer's schemas carry the same double face, and so does every rung of the net.

Written down:

$$K_n = \text{Net}(K_{(n-1)}), \text{ and } K_n \in K_{(n+1)}$$

This is identity across scale in its plainest form. It says nothing about causes and it needs no arrow. It says that the same thing is found again, deeper.

One thing it does not say on its own. Nothing in the holon makes the rungs discrete. A whole that is also a part could sit anywhere on a continuum, and most systems thinking has left it there.

The mesh does that work. A mesh closes at 2π , and half a knot does not exist. So the ladder has rungs rather than a slope.

The holon gives the shape of the ladder. The number gives it its steps.

Expansion and contraction are the net breathing

Hyper Being expands being-in-the-world. Wild Being contracts it. A rhythm, not a hierarchy.

The net has the same pair as a state: taut and slack. Strung tight, it is stiff and rings. Let out, it is soft and absorbs. Coming together, going apart. The wheel turning forward and back.

One more, which I did not expect to find.

Michel Henry set out to describe what he called the essence of manifestation. His image for it is exact. It works like a black hole for ontology. It distorts everything that appears, and it never appears itself. You know it only by its traces.

A medium detectable only through what it bends. That was written in 1963, in French, by a phenomenologist who had never thought about vacuum energy in his life.

4. Depth and scope are not the same axis

Here I have to correct myself.

The obvious move, once you have Palmer's ladder of schemas beside the net's ladder of windings, is to line them up. Facet, Monad, Pattern, Form, System, Meta-system, Domain, World, Kosmos, Pluriverse on one side; elementary, molecular, living, social, planetary, cosmic on the other. Two countings of one ladder.

That move is wrong, and Palmer's own work says why.

A schema is not a level of the world. It is a template through which spatiotemporal organization becomes intelligible. The same cell can be met as a monad, as a pattern, as a form, as a system, or as a meta-system, depending on the question being asked. None of those readings is the true one and the others approximations. They are different scopes.

So the two ladders do not lie on one line. They lie on two axes, at right angles.

The net's ladder says *where in the medium* something stands. Palmer's ladder says *under which scope* it is disclosed. Every winding depth admits several schematic readings, and the same schema can be applied at many depths.

what is encountered = winding depth × schematic scope × the situation of the one encountering it

This is not a technicality. It settles an old ambiguity about scale-free claims. Matching statistics at two levels do not make the levels the same material. They indicate that one generative grammar is being realized in different substrates, and that both can be described through the same schema. A neuron, a market and a star are not one object. They can be one *reading*.

There is a constraint on which readings are available, and it is a fitting constraint rather than a causal one. A Form reading requires an actual closure. A System reading requires persistent internal relations. A Meta-system reading requires a horizon of alternative trajectories. Where the phenomenon does not supply these, the schema does not apply. It is not wrong; it simply does not fit.

5. Where the spacing of Palmer's ladder comes from

There is one place where the net does say something about Palmer's ladder, and it is worth stating because it turns a postulate into a reading.

Palmer's rule for the schemas is that each spans two adjacent dimensions, and each internal dimension is shared by two schemas. He proposes it. He does not derive it.

Take one winding operation. It lifts an organization from a configuration in dimension d to a closure in $d+1$. Then each schema spans the source and the result of one such step:

$$\Sigma_d = (d, d+1)$$

Adjacent schemas share a dimension, because the result of one step is the source of the next. The rule falls out. Two dimensions per schema, two schemas per dimension, read off the winding rather than assumed.

Two honest qualifications belong with this, in the text rather than in a footnote.

The pair structure is read off the winding. The *names* are not. Which schema belongs at (2,3) rather than (1,2) comes from phenomenological interpretation. Winding alone does not say that a closure should be called a Form.

And the order of Pattern and Form is not settled in Palmer's own writing. Some of his summaries put Pattern before Form; others list Form first, and a few omit Pattern where Form appears. The whole dimensional reading turns on it. It is a reading question, answerable from the corpus, and it is the first thing to check.

6. Where the observer enters

The net leaves one thing open, and phenomenology is precisely the discipline that has thought about it.

If observer and observed are the same strand, what stops every knot from being an observer? Without an answer, the chiasm slides into a claim that a stone perceives.

Palmer's structure lets the question come apart. Physical closure need not already be observation. Three closures can be told apart, and they are three, not one.

Physical closure. A resonance returns in phase and stands as a knot. Nothing more.

Autopoietic closure. A knot produces and repairs the conditions of its own standing. It makes the boundary that makes it.

Phenomenological closure. A reflexive knot distinguishes itself, its surroundings, and what is relevant, within a horizon.

An observer is then a reflexive winding inside the net, whose operations partition the net into self, object, background and horizon. Not an eye outside. A fold, whose folding is what a world looks like from there.

The partition is shaped by bodily organization and by shared practice. It neither exhausts the net nor invents it.

This is exactly Heidegger's being-in-the-world, said in one strand. Dasein discloses a world and remains one finite entity among others.

And it is communal. Language, instruments and disciplines synchronize the readings of many observers. A scientific world is a reflexive social winding that holds repeatable projections steady and lets resistant phenomena push back.

There is a further distinction here worth keeping. A storm and a cell both load and discharge. Only the cell makes the membrane and the metabolism that make it. A society adds one more turn: its participants coordinate through symbols that change the organization those symbols describe.

The cycle is the same at all three. The kind of closure is not. So the interesting comparison across depths is not matching statistics alone. It is closure capacity: what is held, what boundary is made, what returns into the loop as information about self and surroundings.

7. What each side has that the other lacks

Phenomenology has a hundred years of trained description. It has a vocabulary for how something stands as something, tested against lived experience, refined by people who did the looking themselves.

It has no unit. That is not a failing of the phenomenologists. Nothing in their method could have produced one. They were describing what appears, and what appears does not arrive with a scale printed on it.

The net has the unit. A mesh is 2π . A half knot does not exist, so the depths are whole. The counting bites: it makes some configurations simply unavailable.

It has almost no vocabulary for description. It can say where. It struggles to say *as what*.

The exchange is obvious once it is stated. Take their language. Bring the number.

8. The unfinished book

There is one more reason to go this way rather than another.

The strongest single text in the tradition is unfinished. *The Visible and the Invisible* breaks off. The flesh and the chiasm are named, sketched, and left standing. The working notes at the back are where Merleau-Ponty was actually going, and they stop mid-thought.

Everyone who has tried to complete it has come at it from inside philosophy, with philosophy's instruments. Those instruments are descriptive. They can restate the flesh; they cannot count it.

That is an open front, and it is open in the right direction.

9. What this is for

Not a new theory. A working language.

If the aim is to configure the medium rather than push against it, then the first requirement is a way of describing the medium that does not smuggle cause arrows back in. Description at the right depth, in a vocabulary already tested against lived experience for a century.

Phenomenology built that vocabulary. It was assembled by people who studied the phenomenon directly, in themselves, before formalising anything — Husserl on his own consciousness, Merleau-Ponty on his own hands, on a blind man's stick, on an organist learning a new instrument. That is the right order of work.

The net brings what they never had: whole numbers, and a mesh worth 2π .

One sentence holds it:

Phenomenology is the net becoming locally manifest to itself through reflexive windings.

Annotated References

The phenomenological line

Aristotle (384–322 BCE). The origin of the problem. In the *Metaphysics* he observes that "being" is said in many ways — as substance, as quality, as relation, as potentiality. He does not resolve it. That unresolved remark is the seed of everything below.

Plato, *Timaeus* (c. 360 BCE). Contains the third kind of Being: the *chōra*, the receptacle. Neither a thing nor a form, but that in which things come to be. It must have no character of its own, since any character would contaminate everything it received. Plato says it is grasped only by a bastard reasoning, as in a dream. This is the oldest description of a constitutive medium in the Western record, and Palmer identifies it directly with Hyper Being.

Franz Brentano (1838–1917). German philosopher and psychologist. His dissertation, *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle* (1862), reopened Aristotle's remark as a live question. He also founded scientific psychology and taught Husserl. He is the hinge between the ancient problem and the modern method.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Founder of phenomenology. Key works: *Logical Investigations* (1900–01), *Ideas I* (1913), *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), *The Crisis of European Sciences* (1936). His decisive move was methodological: study consciousness directly and rigorously, first-hand, rather than constructing concepts about it. His central finding for the present purpose is essence perception — the direct grasp of the kind of a thing, prior to induction and deduction. From the *Crisis* comes the lifeworld: the pre-theoretical ground from which scientific abstraction is taken. His slogan, *zu den Sachen selbst* (to the things themselves), is a refusal of explanation in favour of description. He is the reason this tradition qualifies as first-hand work rather than formalisation.

Aron Gurwitsch (1901–1973). Husserl's student. In *The Field of Consciousness* (1957) he brought Gestalt psychology into phenomenology, treating perception as a field with foreground and background moments rather than a set of discrete contents. Relevant here because a field with figure and ground is closer to a net than a list of objects is.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Husserl's student and his most consequential departure. *Being and Time* (1927) split Being in two: present-at-hand (pointing, the frozen object) and ready-to-hand (grasping, the tool that disappears in use). The second only becomes visible when it breaks. His Dasein is being-in-the-world: not a spectator, but a finite being whose practical involvement already discloses a world. Later, in the essay on technology, he introduced *Gestell* — the enframing by which modern technology reduces the world to a standing stock of usable resources. He also began writing Being under erasure, marking a third kind he could name but not develop.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). *Being and Nothingness* (1943) placed Nothingness at the centre of consciousness. Palmer's reading is that this inverts Heidegger rather than extending him, and stays trapped in the present-at-hand. Included here because the standoff between Sartre's Nothingness and Heidegger's Process Being is the specific opposition whose cancellation produces the third and fourth kinds. His *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) is a major and largely unread work on how groups form and harden.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). The central figure for this essay. *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) rebuilt Heidegger's distinctions in bodily terms — pointing and grasping — and, at its end, found a third: the expansion of being-in-the-world, in which a tool or instrument is absorbed into the body. The blind man's stick and the organist are his. *The Visible and the Invisible* (published posthumously, 1964) introduces the flesh and the chiasm. The flesh is the single stuff of which the seer and the seen are folds. The chiasm is the reversibility between them, holding despite the law of the excluded middle. He was killed in a car accident in 1961 and the book breaks off unfinished. Its working notes are the most productive unfinished pages in modern philosophy.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). Brought ethics into fundamental ontology, starting from the face of the other rather than from the structure of the subject. His *Totality and Infinity* (1961) is a standing warning against any concept that claims to capture everything. His contribution to the sequence used here is the posture of *bearing* — the child bearing up under the mother's attention, the mother bearing the child. Carrying rather than acting on.

Michel Henry (1922–2002). French phenomenologist, largely outside the main line. *The Essence of Manifestation* (1963) argues against what he saw as Heidegger's hidden assumption of ontological monism, working from Meister Eckhart instead. His result is the striking one quoted above: the essence of manifestation functions like a black hole for ontology, distorting everything that appears

while never appearing itself, known only through its traces. Anyone working on a constitutive medium should read this description before writing their own.

Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328). German mystic and Dominican. Reached the same territory six centuries early, describing the ground of the soul as identical with the ground of God — no separation, therefore no relation between two things. Michel Henry's route back to the non-dual reading runs through him.

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Took the third kind of Being and named it *différance* — differing and deferring in one word, with a silent misspelling that can be written but not heard. *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1967) pursue the traces that lie beneath signs, beneath symbols, beneath frozen representations. Grammatology is the study of what leaves marks without presenting itself.

Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Félix Guattari (1930–1992). *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). They took up Wild Being and produced the rhizome: a network with no individuals, only connections, and no privileged centre or root. The nearest thing in twentieth-century philosophy to a net without a weaver. Deleuze's *The Fold* (1988) gives a vocabulary for perspective, interior and exterior in one figure, directly relevant to a strand wound through itself.

Francisco Varela (1946–2001), Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind* (1991). Joins cognitive science and phenomenology through enaction: cognition as world-disclosure by an embodied participant rather than representation from outside. The one place where the two traditions of this essay have already met in print, and the natural first stop for anyone who wants to see it done.

The systems line

Kent D. Palmer (b. 1946). American systems theorist, systems engineer and continental philosopher, with doctorates from the London School of Economics and the University of South Australia. Two bodies of work matter here. First, the kinds of Being: Pure, Process, Hyper, Wild, and his own addition, Ultra — with the claim that the series terminates at five rather than continuing indefinitely. Second, General Schemas Theory: a family of schemas — facet, monad, pattern, form, system, meta-system or openscape, domain, world, kosmos, pluriverse — governed by the rule of two schemas per dimension and two dimensions per schema. He also developed Special Systems Theory, on dissipative, autopoietic and reflexive organization, and *Emergent Design* (2009) is his systematic joining of phenomenology, ontology and schemas. His writing is difficult, and it is difficult because he refuses to flatten a layered problem. His archive is at academia.edu and archonic.net; the older *Conceptual Labyrinth* pages give the clearest short account of the fragmentation of Being.

Humberto Maturana (1928–2021) and Francisco Varela (1946–2001). *Autopoiesis and Cognition* (1980). Living organization is a network that produces the components and the boundary that produce the network. This gives exact content to the second of the three closures — a knot that re-ties itself.

Ilya Prigogine (1917–2003) and Isabelle Stengers. *Order Out of Chaos* (1984). Dissipative structures: order held far from equilibrium by throughput. The physical case for a pattern that stands without producing itself, and so the contrast against which autopoietic closure is defined.

Arthur Koestler (1905–1983). Hungarian-British writer, best known for *Darkness at Noon*, and in his later years a serious if unorthodox theorist of hierarchy. *The Ghost in the Machine* (1967)

introduces the holon: a whole with respect to its parts, a part with respect to a larger whole, with the face of Janus looking both ways at once. He coined the word because he judged that neither "whole" nor "part" alone could describe anything that actually exists in a layered world. It is the received name for identity across scale, and it is exactly the structure of a knot that turns out to be a net when looked into. What Koestler could not supply is a reason for the layers to be discrete.

Len Troncale (b. 1943). Systems scientist. Systems Processes Theory catalogues isomorphies — feedback, cycling, boundary formation — that recur at every scale of organization, with linkage propositions connecting them. Much of Palmer's later work is written in response to him.

Tyler Volk. Biologist at NYU. *Quarks to Culture* (2017) sets out combogenesis: successive levels of organization, each built from combinations of the level below, running from quarks to nucleons to atoms to molecules to cells to societies. A ladder with a stated rule for the step.

Robert Rosen (1934–1998). Theoretical biologist. *Anticipatory Systems* (1985) and *Life Itself* (1991). Living systems contain a model of themselves and their environment, and act on the model's forecast. Life anticipates; it does not pursue a goal set from outside. He also argued that Aristotle's reduction of causation lost something present in the older teaching — directly relevant to a model with no cause arrows in it.

Martin K. Jones, *Equivalent Exchange* (equivalentexchange.blog, 2010–present). A sixteen-year catalogue of fourfold, eightfold, twelvefold and sixteenfold structures across philosophy, logic, science, mythology and esotericism, each rendered as a single diagram with sources. Includes a post on Palmer's levels of Being, treating them as one more fourfold running from simplicity to complexity. Useful as an index of recurring ordering patterns rather than as argument.

Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997). Greek-French philosopher. His concept of the *magma* names the source of genuine novelty: a substrate that admits of ordering but is never exhausted by any ordering laid over it. His question — whether real newness exists, or whether everything is recombination — is the question behind any account of how a net acquires new knots.

Albert Borgmann (1937–2023). Philosopher of technology. His device paradigm describes how technology converts engaged practices into effortless commodities, and how the machinery disappears behind the interface. The screen through which the world is now viewed is his example, extended.

Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950). Source of the map–territory distinction: the map is not the territory, and no map carries all of what it maps. The plain statement of what a projection loses — a sphere flattened onto a square cannot be recovered from the square.