

Objecthood as Alternation: Dynamic Existence and the Infinitesimal Center

Claus Janew¹

Abstract

This paper develops a phenomenological ontology of objecthood centered on alternation. Existing accounts of horizontality, embodiment, affordance, Gestalt organization, and sensorimotor availability have shown that objects are given through profiled and transformable modes of access rather than as complete self-present units. The remaining problem is how such transformations become transformations of one object rather than a succession of appearances or a loose plurality of capacities. I argue that objecthood requires alternation: returnable transition among distinguishable phases. Such transitions condense around what I call an infinitesimal center: the unity-function through which a differentiated manifold is gathered as one object. The phenomenological thesis is that an object appears as one only through structured alternation within and between standpoints. The ontological thesis is that objecthood, as objecthood, is best understood as dynamic relational individuation rather than static self-presence. The resulting view, dynamic existence, accepts the realist force of object-resistance while rejecting static givenness as an explanation of object-unity. Objectivity is not viewlessness, but stabilized transposability among standpoints.

Keywords: objecthood; alternation; dynamic existence; infinitesimal center; phenomenology; horizontality; dynamic individuation; panpsychism; objectivity; intersubjectivity; process ontology

1. Introduction

A glass stands on a table. I see its nearer side; its hidden back is co-given as reachable through further access. I perceive one glass, not a flat profile. I can move around it or reach for it; another observer can confirm or correct what I take it to be. The object exceeds its present profile while remaining available as one through possible transitions.

Several traditions have made this point in different ways. Husserlian horizontality describes the excess of the object over its current profile. Merleau-Pontian embodiment and Gibsonian affordance theory show that perception is already practical. Gestalt psychology rejects the

¹ Correspondence: Claus Janew (Independent), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6393-4626>, clausjanew@free-will.de

reduction of wholes to aggregates, while sensorimotor enactivism treats perceptual presence as access to possible transformation. These accounts are indispensable. Yet the problem of object-unity remains: how do such modes of access condense into one object-pole capable of being stabilized, corrected, divided, or dissolved?

This paper answers that question through the concept of *alternation*. Alternation is returnable transition among distinguishable phases. The seen side of the glass, the anticipated back, remembered encounters, bodily access, and another observer's correction form a dynamic configuration in which the object can be restored as the same, corrected as misperceived, transformed as changed, or dissolved as illusory. A stable object is the quasi-static condensation of such alternations.

The paper defends two connected claims. The phenomenological claim is that an object appears as one only through structured alternation within and between standpoints. The ontological claim is that objecthood, insofar as it is objecthood rather than mere occurrence or bare being, is best understood as dynamic relational individuation. The transition from the first claim to the second proceeds abductively: phenomenological analysis discloses a structure of unity across variation that any adequate ontology of objects must explain.

I call the combined view *dynamic existence*.² Dynamic existence treats object-stability as an achieved relational form rather than primitive stasis. A glass can exist while no one presently attends to it, but its existence as a glass is intelligible through the ways in which it can be distinguished, resisted, transformed, damaged, or destroyed. The decisive question concerns the glass's unity: what makes it one glass rather than a plurality of disconnected features or relations?

The target is a specific realist assumption: that object-unity may be treated as primitive while profiles and transformations remain secondary. Many realist ontologies already reject crude inert substance. Structural realists, powers theorists, neo-Aristotelians, and process philosophers all acknowledge, in different ways, that objects cannot be understood as self-enclosed blocks. The present argument presses a more precise demand: any account of objecthood must explain how the structures it invokes form one object across variation. Dynamic existence supplies such an account through alternation and the infinitesimal center.

Objectivity, on this view, is stabilized transposability among standpoints. The discussion concentrates on perceptual objecthood, especially ordinary material objects. The account can be extended, with modifications, to events, artworks, social objects, and scientific objects insofar as each is stabilized through returnable forms of appearance, practice, interpretation, or

² A broader version of the view appears in Janew (2011). The present article relies only on the narrower claim that objecthood is constituted through returnable alternation and center-field organization. It does not presuppose the stronger claims about freedom or universal alternation developed elsewhere.

measurement. Perceptual objecthood provides the clearest entry because its structure is both ordinary and philosophically revealing.

2. Alternation, condensation, and the infinitesimal center

A *standpoint* means more than a spatial location or a subjective opinion. It is the concrete manner in which a world is available. It includes what is perceived, what matters, and what can follow. The same glass appears differently to a thirsty person and to a chemist; it also appears differently when it rests safely on the table and when it is about to fall. A standpoint is already shaped by orientation, concern, and possible continuation.

Standpoints are internally mobile. One can move, attend otherwise, remember, anticipate, or be corrected. These shifts enter the very formation of objecthood, because they allow or disallow something to appear as one thing across variation.

Alternation begins where succession becomes returnable. A mere sequence gives change; alternation preserves enough relation between phases for return, comparison, or transformation. What matters is not the specific kind of relation in isolation, but whether the phases can be coordinated as moments of one developing unity.

Alternation may be actual or virtual. A simple figure can be grasped at once, yet it remains structured by possible transitions: from part to whole, from figure to ground, from present orientation to possible rotation. Virtual alternation is restricted to possible transitions that would preserve, test, transform, or dissolve a unity. A random aggregate does not become an object simply because attention can wander across it. Alternation becomes object-forming where a transition can return to, modify, or undo the same emerging whole.

Condensation is the stabilization of such transitions into a quasi-static object. The object is “quasi-static” because it is stable enough for ordinary use and public reference, while its stability arises through recurrent access, practical reliability, and social correction. The “quasi” clarifies the kind of stability involved: the object is real as stabilized, rather than inertly self-present.

Condensation has a center-periphery structure. The periphery is the differentiated range through which the object can be approached and varied. The center is the point of returnability that holds these differences together. It is a unity-function.

I call this unity-function the *infinitesimal center*. The phrase should be understood functionally. It names neither a spatial midpoint inside the object, nor a hidden substance behind appearances, nor a mathematical infinitesimal. Since no particular profile or property can play this role, the center names the function by which a manifold forms one object rather than merely occurring together.

The infinitesimal center earns its place because objecthood is a matter of becoming and remaining one across variation. A bare appeal to unity can say that the glass is one; it cannot by itself explain why the glint in a dim room fails to resolve into one glass, why an apparent object may divide into several, or why a corrected perception still concerns the same thing. The infinitesimal center names the operative pole through which these cases are distinguished. It allows a configuration to stabilize, shift, split, or fail as an object.

Center and differentiated field are reciprocal. A point without articulated phases has no object-forming meaning; an uncentered multiplicity has not yet taken object-form. The field differentiates, the center gathers, and the object exists as the dynamic unity of both.

The center is also recursive. A glass can appear as one object. When attention shifts to its rim, the rim can become a new whole; a crack in the rim can do the same. Conversely, the glass can recede into the larger situation of table and room. Larger wholes and smaller parts are organized through shifting scales of returnability, not through a final hierarchy of indivisible units. What was central can become a moment within a wider unity; what was peripheral can be recentered.

This recursive structure keeps the infinitesimal center from becoming a metaphysical atom. It is the local function through which differentiated multiplicity takes object-form.

3. The glass and the diagnostic role of failure

The example of the glass shows the limits of present givenness. I see one side of the glass; the hidden side is co-given as accessible through further perception. If I move, the profile changes in an orderly way. If I reach, sight is coordinated with touch. If someone turns the glass and reveals a crack, the original object is corrected as the same object now more determinately disclosed.

Objectivity here means stability across transposable standpoints. Different observers need mutually correctable routes of access, not identical appearances. The public glass is a stable object of possible correction.

Failure cases show the same structure more sharply. Suppose one enters a dim room and sees a glint on the table. It might be a glass, or it might be a reflection. At first, stability is undecided. The visible profile does not securely return to one center. If one moves, the glint may shift in a way incompatible with the expected object. If one reaches, the hand may encounter nothing where the object seemed to be. When the light is turned on, the supposed glass may dissolve into a reflection. Here variation breaks objecthood apart instead of confirming it.

There are also cases of splitting. What first appears as one object may resolve into two: a cup behind a reflection, or a shadow crossing a material thing. The initial unity reorganizes. What

had seemed to be one center differentiates into several centers, each with its own pattern of confirmation.

Temporal objects exhibit the same logic. A sequence of tones may begin to form a melody, then fail to sustain itself and disperse into noise. Conversely, a melody remains one through the condensation of the sequence into a coherent temporal unity. The melody is neither a thing behind the tones nor a heap of tones. It is a returnable unity of temporal variation.

These cases are philosophically important because they show that profile and transformation alone are insufficient. Variation can confirm an object, expose an illusion, or divide an apparent unity. Only centered return distinguishes these outcomes. Where the center stabilizes, an object appears as one; where it shifts, the object is reidentified; where it splits, the apparent unity divides; where it fails, objecthood does not take hold.

The precise phenomenological conclusion is that an appearing object-unity depends on structured possibilities of transition without reducing objects to subjective products. The object's unity is not identical with any single profile, and appeal to a bare hidden substance would not explain how profiles are stabilized, corrected, or dissolved. The object as appearing is the stabilized pole of return across variation.

4. What alternation adds to existing accounts

The contribution of alternation is easiest to see by distinguishing availability from centering. Existing accounts explain how an object exceeds what is presently given. Alternation explains how that excess becomes object-forming. It takes horizontality, embodiment, affordance, Gestalt organization, and sensorimotor transformation as essential inheritances, then asks how these dimensions gather into one pole of return.

This distinction is decisive. A profile may point beyond itself, and movement may lawfully transform appearance, without those references and transformations stabilizing one object. A reflection, an ambiguous figure, or a misleading shadow can each sustain further appearances while failing to resolve into a stable thing. Alternation therefore does not add another modality of access to horizontality or sensorimotor availability. It names the operation by which modalities of access become phases of one object, or fail to do so.

Husserl is the closest point of comparison. His analyses of adumbration and horizontality show that the perceived object exceeds its current profile. The absent side is intended as available through further possible experience (Husserl, 1982). His analysis of time-consciousness also shows that presence is never a punctual now, but a dynamic relation of retention and anticipation (Husserl, 1991).

Alternation specifies a further operation. The absent side of the object functions as a route for approach, fulfillment, frustration, or correction. The object-pole, accordingly, is more than the identical correlate of profiles; it is the condensation of a center-periphery structure. Husserl gives the indispensable analysis of horizontality. Alternation asks how horizons stabilize as one object, and how that stabilization can shift or fail.

This difference also matters for intersubjectivity. A shared object emerges through transposability among standpoints. My route of access, your route of access, and further possible corrections must converge without becoming identical experiences. The communal object is a stable result of mutual correction.

Merleau-Ponty adds the bodily dimension of this structure. The body is not an object added to perception from outside; it is the general means of having a world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). A glass is seen as reachable, graspable, avoidable, and usable. Perception is already situated action.

Motor intentionality supplies one mode of returnability. The glass becomes one object because bodily orientation can converge with memory, anticipation, habit, and correction. Embodiment shows that perception is active and situated. Alternation explains how situated access takes object-form.

Ecological and sensorimotor accounts sharpen this point. Gibson's theory of affordances shows that things are disclosed through what they offer an organism (Gibson, 1986). Later ecological approaches develop this insight by treating perception as situated engagement rather than passive reception (Chemero, 2009). Noë and O'Regan show that perceptual presence depends on practical understanding of how appearances change with movement (O'Regan & Noë, 2001; Noë, 2004).

Yet affordance and transformation still require centering. A reflection may transform lawfully as I move, but the movement can reveal that no object stands where I thought one stood. An ambiguous scene may support several incompatible patterns of access. Possible dealings and sensorimotor transformations become object-forming only when they are centered as transformations of one thing. Sensorimotor availability explains why movement matters. Alternation explains how movement-sensitive variation becomes an object.

Gestalt psychology rightly insists that wholes are not reducible to sums of parts (Koffka, 1935). A melody is not a heap of notes, and a figure is not a heap of points. This insight is indispensable, but objecthood requires more than momentary organization. A Gestalt may be coherent within a present scene. An object must also be restorable across transformation. Alternation gives Gestalt organization modal and temporal depth: a whole becomes an object when it can be returned to, tested, corrected, and preserved across variation.

5. Dynamic relational individuation

The phenomenological analysis shows that the object as appearing is constituted through alternation. The ontological question is whether this structure concerns appearance alone or objecthood itself. I argue that objecthood itself requires dynamic relational individuation.

To exist as an object is to be determinately one across possible variation. A thing must remain distinguishable through change; otherwise it becomes an occurrence, a blur, or an externally connected aggregate. If the unity of the thing is explained only by invoking the object that already has that unity, the question has been presupposed rather than answered.

The relevant structure is the object's *modal-relational field*: the structured range of ways in which a thing can remain itself through change and relation. In the case of a glass, this structure is what makes filling it different from shattering it, and both different from replacing it. Such possibilities are more than ways in which we happen to know the object. They articulate what it is for the object to have determinate unity.

A glass without any modal-relational structure would not be a glass. If no distinction between persistence, alteration, and destruction made sense, there would be no objecthood left to attribute. Present perception is not required for this structure. The hidden glass still has a determinate way of resisting, breaking, persisting, and ceasing to be. Its objecthood consists in the structured unity of that range.

Objecthood is relational because determination requires contrast and articulation. It is dynamic because the relevant determinations concern persistence through change. It is individuation because these relations are how the object is one, rather than external additions to an already complete unit.

The strongest realist objection is that modal-relational features presuppose an already unified bearer. The glass first exists as one object, the realist may say, and only then has properties and possible manifestations. Its modal profile expresses its nature but does not constitute its objecthood.

This objection relocates the problem. If the modal features require a bearer, the bearer must explain how they cohere as one object. If the bearer is a bare substratum, it explains unity only by naming an unknown support. If the bearer is a structured essence, the question becomes how that structure remains one across possible manifestations. If the answer appeals to the organization of the object's own powers and relations, the account has moved toward dynamic individuation. This view analyzes unity as center-field organization rather than treating it as primitive.

The realist may insist that object-unity is simply primitive. That position is coherent, but it purchases coherence at the cost of explanation. The present account does not deny that unity

may be basic in some metaphysical sense; it asks what structure makes such unity intelligible as object-unity rather than bare numerical identity. Dynamic individuation supplies that structure by showing how persistence, alteration, resistance, and destruction are organized around one center of return.

This point is easily misunderstood. Dynamic existence can work with essence, form, power, or structure, provided these notions explain object-unity instead of presupposing it. If essence means the structured way in which a thing remains itself through possible variation, then essence is already dynamic in the relevant sense. If form means the principle by which matter becomes one thing across change, then form performs a centering function. If powers are powers of one object, their unity requires explanation. The issue concerns whether a given metaphysical vocabulary accounts for one object rather than a plurality of coordinated determinations.

This places dynamic existence near several realist alternatives without collapsing into them. Structural realism already rejects isolated substance, but structure alone does not explain object-polarity. One still needs to say how a region or system of structure becomes one object. The answer proposed here is centering: the condensation of structural relations into a returnable unity.

Powers ontology is also congenial. Dispositions already point beyond static presence toward possible manifestation. But powers must still cohere as powers of one thing. Dynamic existence explains this through center-field organization. A powers theorist may instead appeal to essence; dynamic existence can accept that answer if essence is understood dynamically rather than as an unexplained bearer.

Neo-Aristotelian form is a stronger competitor. A neo-Aristotelian may say that form unifies matter into an object. Dynamic existence can incorporate much of this insight if form is understood as the principle through which an object maintains itself across change. Understood that way, form names the organization of the thing, while the infinitesimal center names the unity-pole through which that organization remains one across alternation. If form is treated as a static primitive, however, it explains unity chiefly by naming it.

Process realism is closest to the present account. Process philosophers reject static substance and give priority to becoming (Whitehead, 1978; Rescher, 1996). Dynamic existence shares this rejection of inert being, while adding that process alone does not yet explain objecthood. Object-forming process requires returnability. A storm, a conversation, a melody, and a glass all involve process, but each becomes object-like only insofar as its phases condense into a unity that can be recognized, transformed, or lost.

The ontological conclusion remains realist about the resistance and independence of objects while denying that their objecthood consists in static self-presence. To be an object is to be dynamically individuated within a modal-relational field. Static realism is incomplete unless it

explains how such a field takes object-form. Dynamic existence gives that explanation through alternation and the infinitesimal center.

6. A conditional implication for minimal awareness

The main argument concerns objecthood. Its relevance to panpsychism is conditional, but not incidental. If objecthood itself involves center-field organization, then debates about the place of experience in reality cannot remain indifferent to the form of object-unity. The account developed here establishes a structural claim: objecthood involves the centering of a differentiated range of possible transitions. Whether such centering has experiential or proto-experiential character depends on a further premise.

The relevant premise is that experience cannot arise from what is wholly non-experiential. This premise is familiar from contemporary panpsychist, panprotopsyichist, Russellian-monist, and cosmopsychist literature (Alter & Nagasawa, 2015; Strawson, 2006; Shani, 2015; Goff, 2017; Chalmers, 2017a). The present paper does not defend it. It indicates how the account of objecthood matters if the premise is accepted.

On such a view, the basic unit would be a dynamic field within which centers of integration can emerge, differentiate, and dissolve, rather than a tiny subject that later combines with others. This reformulates the familiar combination problem. Standard constitutive micropsychism begins with many micro-subjects and must explain how these compose one macro-subject. James pressed this difficulty against “mind-dust” theories (James, 1890), and Chalmers has formulated it as the subject-summing problem (Chalmers, 2017b). Dynamic existence begins instead from fields and centering. A local center functions as a unity-pole within a dynamic field rather than as a miniature subject added to others. The combination problem is thereby recast as a problem of field-centering.

7. Clarifications and objections

One worry is that alternation either demands too much or includes too much. If alternation meant actual serial inspection, then simple figures would be counterexamples: a triangle may be grasped at once. If alternation meant any possible shift whatsoever, then almost anything could count as objecthood. The concept avoids both extremes through returnability. Alternation may be actual or virtual, but the relevant transitions must preserve, test, transform, or dissolve object-identity. A triangle can be grasped at once because its sides and angles are already organized as one shape that can be rotated, distinguished from its ground, and identified again. A random pattern of marks may also be scanned, but unless such scanning returns to one object-pole, no object has been constituted.

A second objection treats alternation as a renaming of horizontality or sensorimotor availability. Husserl already shows that a present profile refers beyond itself to absent profiles, and sensorimotor enactivism already explains how appearances vary with possible movement. Alternation accepts these insights while identifying a further condition: profiles and transformations become object-forming only when they are centered as phases of one thing. Ambiguity, illusion, and perceptual failure show why this further condition matters. There may be horizons and lawful transformations without stable objecthood.

A further worry concerns the infinitesimal center. Why introduce this term rather than simply speak of unity? The answer is that unity names the result, whereas the infinitesimal center names the function by which a differentiated manifold counts as one across variation. The term earns its place in cases where unity stabilizes, shifts, splits, or fails. If a glint resolves into a glass, if an apparent object divides into reflection and material thing, or if a corrected perception still concerns the same object, unity is not merely present or absent. It is operating through a center of return.

The most serious objection is ontological. Manifestation, correction, and reidentification seem to concern our access to things rather than their being. The argument, however, appeals to the modal-relational structure through which something can remain itself through change. A glass in an uninhabited place still has a determinate way of resisting, breaking, persisting, and ceasing to be. These possibilities need not be presently perceived in order to characterize its objecthood. The view is therefore compatible with realism about unperceived objects, while still requiring realism to explain how the object's determinations cohere as one thing.

A related realist reply is that object-unity may simply be primitive. This position is coherent, but it leaves object-unity unexplained. The present account does not require every realist ontology to accept its terminology. It asks only that structure, form, essence, power, or process be able to explain how one object takes shape across variation. Dynamic existence supplies one such explanation through alternation and the infinitesimal center.

Finally, the minimal-awareness section should not be read as an additional conclusion forced by the objecthood argument alone. The main argument establishes structural centering. Its possible proto-experiential significance depends on the further premise that experience cannot arise from what is wholly non-experiential. Readers who reject that premise can still accept the paper's central account of objecthood.

8. Conclusion

Objecthood is constituted through alternation. An object appears as one through structured transitions within and between standpoints. The visible side of the glass, its hidden side, another

observer's correction, and its possible transformation enter a configuration that condenses into one object-pole.

The infinitesimal center names the formal core of this condensation. It is the unity-function through which a differentiated manifold counts as one across variation. Without such centering, transitions remain transitions. Without differentiated transitions, unity is empty. Objecthood requires both field and center.

Ontologically, objecthood is best understood as dynamic relational individuation. A real object is neither a static bearer behind all relation nor a mere bundle of appearances. It is a stabilized modal-relational unity: one thing insofar as its determinations cohere across possible variation. Static realism is incomplete unless it explains this coherence. Dynamic existence offers such an explanation.

The real object is real through the stabilized alternations that make it one.

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Declarations

This paper was drafted and revised with the help of large-language-model tools. The overall conception and final endorsement of the arguments are mine, and I take full responsibility for the content.

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