# Methodological Functionalism Against Metaphysical Certainty Regarding Shared Phenomenological States

**Revised (Ver. 1)**

By Rhytham Das

Post Graduate, Master of Arts in Philosophy

EMAIL: das.rhytham@gmail.com

PHONE: +91-8638133375

ORCID: 0009-0004-6928-6833

November 7, 2026

# Introduction

An amusing question that lies at the outset of philosophical, or to be more specific, phenomenological effort has been devoted to the question of whether two individuals can experience the same phenomenological state arising from the same transcendent object. In our present context, the word *transcendent* is used in the sense of the Husserlian branch of phenomenology[1], such that there exist objects (the objective dimension) to which subjective acts of phenomenological achievements are correlated. Further, there is an interplay of absence and presence, of protension and retention, that mark the relationship between transcendent objects out there and our phenomenological experience of them.[2] Husserl inherited the term *Akt* (Act) from his teacher, Franz Brentano, who claimed that all mental phenomena are characterised by their intentional directedness (*Aktcharakter*) (Brentano, 1874, Book II, Ch. 1). Though Husserl's attempt at phenomenological analysis took the intentional element well beyond Brentano's initial technical sophistry. In *Logical Investigations* (Husserl, 1900, Inv. V, §§14–22), we see the usage of the expression *Akte*; however, by the beginning of *Ideas* (1913, §§84–90), Husserl's transcendental turn fully incorporates noesis as the act of phenomenological access to objects via their profiles, in which the transcendent object's presence is made manifest.

This question—which I frame as *the problem of sameness of noesis*—is then this: can the same transcendent object cause two noeses to occur in the phenomenological subject, such that the noeses share a relation of identity to each other? The question presupposes that such sameness admits of determinate metaphysical evaluation. If it can be proven, beyond doubt, that the same object can indeed manifest two identical phenomenological states, we would inevitably be situated in a world of determinate intentional structures; such that if intentional structures could be replicated, it would ensure that the same phenomenological state would also replicate without failure, each and every time. Similarly, if it can be proven that the two noeses are not the same, we would also be situated in a world of different metaphysical consequences altogether.

Alas, the paper shall argue that this presupposition is methodologically unjustified. That is, before we reach either of the affirmative/negative metaphysical consequences of the question, we are made to stop much prior, owing to the fact that we,

[1] See Husserl (1913, §3).
[2] See Welton (2000, pp. 10–20). See also Husserl (1991, §§18–30).

as shall be argued henceforth, are incapable of reaching the truth of this question. In what is argued as *the epistemic inaccessibility* of subjective experience, it shall be seen that it renders all metaphysical claims about experiential sameness unverifiable, trapping us in an infinite regress of justification. Hence, I argue that rather than assert metaphysical truths we cannot access, we ought to adopt what I call *methodological functionalism*: a framework that halts philosophical inquiry when further justification ceases to serve pragmatic or explanatory functions.

Let sameness of noesis be stipulatively defined as follows: if one intentional object yields exactly the same phenomenological experience in two conscious entities, those experiences exhibit sameness of noesis. This may be contrasted with similarity of noesis, where experiences are distinct but analogous. The central obstacle to investigating sameness of noesis is what I term the *incommensurability problem*: if two individuals report the same material object yielding phenomenologically identical experiences, can such sameness ever be cross-verified? If epistemic access lies beyond possibility, we remain suspended between the assumption that "no two noeses yielded by the same intentional object are ever the same" and its antithesis, without reaching either as conclusion. What, then, propels us towards either claim? The answer, I contend, is nothing metaphysical. Instead, we adopt provisional stances based on functional adequacy. This paper defends methodological functionalism as the appropriate response to the incommensurability problem, arguing that metaphysical surety about qualia-sameness is neither epistemically accessible nor methodologically necessary.

The paper is then divided into two sections. In one section, we establish the foundational elements using Husserlian phenomenology, slightly from Fregean epistemology, and also drawing from the Philosophy of Mind literature. In the second section, we establish *methodological functionalism*. In the third section, we address two primary objections and its consequent clarifications and replies.

# I

## The Incommensurability Problem of Qualia Measurement

Following David Chalmers' property dualism (Chalmers, 1996, Ch. 4), I adopt the view that qualia are the phenomenal qualities of mental life—the introspectively accessible "what-it-is-like-ness" of conscious states. A mental state is conscious if there is "something it is like" to be in that state.(Chalmers, 1996, Ch. 1, pp. 4–6); see also

Nagel (1974). Within the context of our established Husserlian phenomenology, it may be said that these qualitative feels, the "what-it-is-like" to see red, feel pain, or experience aesthetic beauty, are the private, phenomenal textures of noetic acts. If noesis is the experiential process and noema the object-as-constituted, then qualia are the experience itself. Chalmers' property dualism holds that mental phenomena exhibit dual properties: psychological (computational, measurable, objectively verifiable) and phenomenological (qualitative, subjective). Pain, for instance, involves both its phenomenological "feel" (reportable only via language) and its psychological processes (neurobiologically measurable firings and inhibitions). The incommensurability problem concerns the former, not the latter.

To explicate the incommensurability problem, consider the following thought experiment involving cybernetic modification in an unforeseeable future. A device, or more precisely, a brainchip, records the complete neurophysiological profile of a user's conscious experience: sense-data from perception (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory), neuronal firing patterns, motor responses, neurotransmitter distributions, hormonal releases, and all measurable psychological processes sufficient to recreate the original qualia. When this data is transmitted to another user via neural interface, the system reproduces a close simulacrum of the original neurophysiological state. The playback user undergoes what appears to be a recreation of the original experience. The philosophical question is this: are both qualia the same? Even if an exact replica of psychological processes is achieved, how do we epistemically confirm the equivalence of the recorded qualia ($A$) with its playback ($B$)? What is the ontological status of these qualia? Is $A = B$?

There is another figure, often drawn alongside Husserl when inspecting the history of the anti-psychologistic debate in the literature: the acclaimed German logician, Gottlob Frege. Drawing inspiration from Frege's optical analogy in "The Thought"(Frege, 1956, pp. 351–352), we encounter a fundamental barrier. Frege compared the moon to reference (objective and publicly accessible), the telescopic lens to sense (also objective if shared), but the retinal image to an idea—something wholly subjective and private. Crucially, even if one were granted access to another's idea, it remains unclear whether one accesses the idea itself, one's idea of the other's idea, or an infinite regress thereof. Note that although Frege's optical analogy primarily serves his anti-psychologistic and semantic objectives, it nonetheless provides the structural basis for an argument concerning the inherently private character of ideas.

Similar drawings by Husserl speak of the idea that while the object itself remains

transcendent to its presence-as-grasped in the phenomenological process by the subject, the *Akte* and *Leistungen*[3] of its profiles are phenomena that the perceiving subject brings to the table. Further, Brentano also attributes to mental phenomena what he calls intentional inexistence (*intentionale Inexistenz*). By this he means that every mental act is directed toward an object which exists in the act as an intentional correlate, whether or not the object exists in the external world. Thus, in perception of material reality, the object may be physically present, but in acts such as remembering, imagining, desiring, or judging, the intentional object may have no external existence at all; it exists only as the object of the act (Brentano, 1874, Book II, Ch. 1, p. 88).

Where Husserl departs from Frege is in this regard: he considers the nature of this process as containing a co-relation between the objective and subjective. As noted by Welton (2000, pp. 13–15), while sense for Frege is objective and available in the world, Husserl argues (in his sense-equivalent term called profiles, which are modes of presentation of objects similar to Fregean senses) that such objectivity itself demands a pivotal role of the perceiving subject, something which Frege fails to fully account for.[4] Nevertheless, we see that there persists a strong ontological separation between mental and physical objects, though the separation itself causes no change in the structure of intentionality of the individual consciousness.

Applied to our thought experiment, then, we reach the idea that although psychological processes ($A$'s and $B$'s recorded data) may be standardised and reproduced, the subjective qualia themselves cannot ever be verified to the same standards. There exists no independent, third-person perspective to ascertain whether $B$ is qualitatively identical to $A$. This epistemic impossibility I term the *incommensurability problem of qualia*.

> **Incommensurability Problem of Qualia:** The subjective qualitative experiences (qualia) of different individuals cannot be objectively measured or compared on a common, shared standard, rendering them inherently inaccessible to intersubjective comparison.

Even introducing a third person ($C$) to compare $A$ and $B$ merely reiterates the problem: we would need $D$ to verify $C$'s comparison, and so forth—an infinite regress.

[3] *Leistungen* refers to the succession of perceptive acts whereby the perceiving object, through its interaction with its many profiles, appears and disappears in front of the perceiving subject.

[4] Note that there is also a *Sinn* in Husserl, but it refers to something radically different than what Frege means by *Sinn* or sense (Frege, 1948, pp. 209–210). For (Husserl, 1913, §§128–134), *Sinn* is something closer to that which brings the many profiles in which an object manifests together as part of the same whole that designates that particular object.

We have no epistemic access to others' qualia. Our only reliance for knowledge of others' internal worlds is their articulation, behaviour, and expressions, none of which provide direct phenomenal access. This thought experiment demonstrates an epistemic incommensurability that persists regardless of metaphysical commitments.

Functionalists might argue that identical functional states entail identical qualia, on the grounds that mental states are individuated by their causal or computational roles (Putnam, 1960; Lewis, 1980)[5] But even if this were metaphysically true, we lack epistemic means to verify it from a third-person perspective. The playback user cannot step outside their phenomenal perspective to compare $B$ with $A$. Thus, the incommensurability holds whether functionalism is true or false.[6]

## Introducing Methodological Functionalism as Response

In light of the incommensurability of cross-verifying two separate qualia, we are left largely with a functionalist programme (Putnam, 1960; Lewis, 1980)[7]: we are to attest that perhaps, so long as through some means (mostly linguistic), we can functionally verify the sameness of two experiences, we may grant it away. However, oftentimes, functionalists are as much metaphysical about their functionalism as they are pragmatistic about functional outputs. That is, they hold that owing to the metaphysical obstacles of verifying intricate problems of consciousness, which Chalmers rightfully terms *the hard problems* (Chalmers, 1996, Ch. 3), we are to turn to functional, and therefore pragmatically verifiable, answers. We can have two kinds of functionalists herein then: the first kind who not only hold that functional answers are superior to metaphysical jargons, but that functionalism itself is the ultimate metaphysical reality. This we may term the strong claim. On the other, we may have, to borrow the term, certain *agnostic* functionalists: who remain neutral as to what may be the true metaphysical states of phenomena with which the expression "hard problems" may be used.[8]

[5] See also (Boden, 1990; Chalmers, 1996).

[6] Classical functionalism was introduced by Putnam (1960) and developed more formally by Lewis (1980), defining mental states by their causal roles rather than intrinsic qualitative character. Contemporary AI and cognitive science often adopt functionalist language, as surveyed by Boden (1990). As Chalmers (1996, pp. 21–30) notes, most cognitive scientists implicitly understand consciousness in functional or computational terms, even though functionalism cannot by itself account for phenomenal character.

[7] See also (Boden, 1990).

[8] This distinction mirrors, but is not identical to, the divide between analytic functionalism and metaphysical (or ontological) functionalism. See Block (1995) for the classical critique of functionalism's

The kind of functionalism I am sympathetic to is the latter. To articulate this, in the following section, I introduce *methodological functionalism*: a provisional functionalism that adopts the functional stance as an epistemic tool while maintaining humility toward ultimate metaphysical truths. It is functionalist in method, not in ontology; it allows us to navigate empirical and linguistic regularities without committing to functionalism as a comprehensive metaphysical doctrine.

# II

If one looks into the philosophical literature, one finds that any attempt to justify metaphysical propositions encounters a structural problem: every metaphysical claim requires justification by another metaphysical claim, yielding infinite regress. If proposition $P_1$ justifies claim $P_0$, and $P_2$ justifies $P_1$, and so forth, when does justification cease? Traditionally, two solutions exist:

1. **Axiomatic Foundations:** Establish self-evident truths requiring no further proof.
2. **Infinite Chains:** Accept infinite justificatory sequences without circularity.

I argue that the second solution collapses into the first: accepting infinite chains without foundation is itself an axiomatic assumption. Axiomatic commitments are therefore unavoidable. The question becomes: where does one stop?

### The z Principle and Functional Adequacy

This proposed philosophy, named methodological functionalism, prescribes halting philosophical inquiry when doing so becomes functionally adequate—a decision that should be formalised through what I call the *z principle*: "If it works, it works." This halting point is not an ultimate metaphysical ground but a provisional terminus guided by epistemic humility. In a chain of metaphysical reasoning where one proposition justifies another, one stops when it is functionally pragmatic to do so. If challenged—"What justifies $z$?"—the answer is recursive: one may pursue $z_1, z_2, \ldots, z_n$ until further pursuit yields no functional benefit. If $z$ works, use $z$; if not, abandon it. This kind of holding, based on the principle of functional utility, is methodological. On one hand, it prescribes a law for when to stop with chains of philosophical inferences. On the

inability to capture phenomenal character.

other, this philosophy is descriptive: it explains a state of affairs of this world, in which philosophers already employ this method. This assertion is novel, and my responsibility is to convince the reader of the same. As argued in (Das, 2025, pp. 12–16), Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche, 1886, ch. 1) builds a case that all philosophical truth-seeking is a will to power—a desire to impose one's metaphysical framework upon the world. Philosophers halt inquiry when they feel their philosophy reflects truth adequately, when it serves functional purposes. This Nietzschean insight substantiates methodological functionalism: philosophies stop at points of insoluble defence, where further probing ceases to be productive. The will to power rests upon terminal points, and terminal points are inherently methodologically functional.

### Primitive Concepts and Terminal Points

> "It is obvious that not all propositions can be proved, for proofs can only begin by assuming something,"
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> —Bertrand Russell, (Russell, 1910, Ch. 1, p. 5)

According to Russell, certain concepts, such as "good", "red", are primitive: they cannot be analysed into smaller constituents. Chalmers (2012, Chs. 1, 3, and 8) similarly identifies primitive concepts as foundational constituents resistant to further decomposition. The primitive concepts are the building blocks of any philosophical theory; they are the base upon which further blocks endure. Take, from Russell's account, the description of ethical theories. The utilitarian, for instance, makes a recall towards utility (Bentham, 1789) or inherent good of all. However, the good itself is not definable by further atomic concepts.

A terminal point is where inferential reasoning ceases because further analysis becomes implausible. What constitutes this point is a primitive concept represented by atomic propositions. Crucially, it appears to me that such terminal points are functionally ultimate, if not necessarily metaphysically ultimate. Owing to epistemic inaccessibility, as seen in the case of determining sameness of qualia, we observe that it is not possible to state whether terminal points also reflect the true metaphysical reality. For instance, say we make a metaphysical claim about a transcendental chair, to which we have no access. As such, we may make a broad claim that such an argument is at least functionally acceptable. Whether they reflect true metaphysical endpoints is epistemically inaccessible—a matter of *epistemic humility*.

**Epistemic Humility:** A philosophical stance acknowledging inherent limitations of knowledge and resisting claims of absolute certainty, especially where evidence is incomplete or fundamentally inaccessible.

### Epistemic Inaccessibility to True Metaphysical Terminal Points

Are primitive concepts metaphysically ultimate, or do they merely represent current limits of analysis? I affirm the latter whilst remaining agnostic, epistemically humble, towards the former. We cannot know whether our terminal points are truly ultimate. Consider Russell's "good": we assume it is primitive, but something deeper might yet explain it. The Humean problem of induction applies: that "good" has not yet been further reduced into more atomic constituents does not mean it never will be. We simply assume that our terminal point concerning the definition of good is the true terminal point as well.

Methodological functionalists therefore assume that held terminal points are provisional, potentially reflecting, but not necessarily coinciding with, true metaphysical termini. This stance respects epistemic limits. To assume our provisional terminal points are metaphysically ultimate overstates our epistemic capacities. Epistemic humility protects us from transcendent truths we cannot access. (Das, 2025, §§1.1.3–1.2, pp. 16–20)

# Methodological Functionalism over Metaphysical Certainty

Let us apply methodological functionalism to the problem of incommensurability in verification of intersubjective phenomenological states. To do that, look at the following model.

## Three Provisional Stances

Given our incapacity to confirm experiential sameness, three practical options emerge. Let:

$A$ : "One transcendental object can yield the same noesis in two separate individuals."

$\neg A$ : "One transcendental object cannot yield the same noesis."

We may in light of this, consider three possible perspectives:

- *Assume $A$*: We provisionally accept that sameness (or at least profound similarity) of experience is possible, and that language and empathy are flawed but functional tools for verifying it. Let us call this the *Intersubjective Stance*.
- *Assume $\neg A$*: We hold that all experience is fundamentally incommensurable, and that all apparent agreement is merely a "happy coincidence" of language-games, not a true sharing of *noesis*. This is the *Solipsistic Stance* (though *pragmatist* or *verificationist* might also fit, or to be more precise, perhaps a *pragmatic solipsist*).
- *Assume Contingency*: We take it that sameness may sometimes occur (for instance, between close friends or over simple stimuli) and sometimes not (as in complex political or aesthetic disagreements).

## Sameness of Noesis Built Upon Incommensurability

Before proceeding, a crucial clarification: none of these stances overcomes the incommensurability problem. Whether we assume $A$, $\neg A$, or contingency, the true metaphysical status of sameness of noesis remains epistemically inaccessible.

1. Firstly, if $A$ is assumed, we make a claim that beyond our provisional acceptance of the sameness of noesis might lie the true fact about its sameness. This stance is a pragmatic leap of faith. It is the necessary assumption for creating what Husserl called the Life-World (*Lebenswelt*), a shared, communal reality (Husserl, 1970). We act as if sameness is possible because a world in which it is not is unliveable. But we must admit that this is a functional posit rather than a verified fact. As such, even if the metaphysical reality of sameness is not truly the case, it still does not hinder our assuming it as so.
2. If $\neg A$ is held, the burden of proof falls upon us to provide explanations for how different factors influence the noesis to such an extent that true sharing or sameness of noesis becomes metaphysically impossible. Again, because incommensurability stands, such a disproof of sameness of noesis will only be a deduction with these multivariate factors as premises and not a verifiable conclusion.

3. Then, if contingency is assumed—this stance claims that shareability is not a simple yes/no property of noesis as a whole. Instead, it is a variable property that depends on the content and complexity of the noetic act.

I wish to adopt the third possibility for a few reasons. Firstly, the problem with assuming $A$ is that it cannot move beyond a mere conjecture or provisional and methodological tool. Even if true metaphysical sameness of noesis were impossible, we can—even in that scenario—assume $A$ and continue to play our language-games, deluding ourselves into positing a possible metaphysical reality of sameness of noesis when it actually does not exist. And such an assumption will not lead us to any practical problems, given the incommensurability of verifying experiences. This perspective remains methodologically neutral to the metaphysical truth and, as such, calls for an agnostic attitude towards it. This might not be sufficient to reject this solution altogether, though it seems a necessary factor in its rejection.

The second option, negating $A$, seems more plausible than the first because it primarily follows from the incommensurability problem, which forms our foundation. If two experiences can never be verified, in the ultimate analysis, whether the sameness of noesis truly is the case or not becomes a redundant pursuit. Even if sameness of noesis were possible, as it can never be ascertained, it always lies beyond our scope of access. As such, the sameness becomes something transcendental—perhaps something forever unreachable. The pragmatic and functional value of such a transcendent thing, to which we lack access, is equal to it not even being there. And for all we know, it might be nothing more than the grandeurs of delusion brought about by our language use. Despite this plausibility, I am still not in favour of it. Because while this option reigns as a pragmatic choice, it cannot, to any greater degree, make the claim that the sameness of noesis *is not there* than the transcendentalists can claim that *it is there*. In fact, we can use a philosophical argument of pragmatic utility against the pragmatic solipsist. For instance, what is useful for the pragmatic solipsist is that which is evident, that which has a practical utility. If the claim is that there is no utility to transcendental truths to which we have no access, then we can provide a counter-argument: imagine that transcendental metaphysical truths themselves exert certain influence on our reality to which we are ignorant. As such, if there is a model of reality which incorporates this transcendental possibility, we have a better chance at pragmatic utility in relation to the forces which remain beyond our conscious awareness than a model which completely renders such transcendence redundant.

In light of this, it seems our third model, named *Contingency*, is in fact the most pragmatic and also the most metaphysically useful option. It gives a certain *benefit of the doubt* to both possibilities and stops us from simplifying noesis into simple shades of black and white. And it also reflects methodological functionalism: we adopt the view that sameness of noesis is a phenomenon to be explained across a spectrum. So, the Contingency stance does not say "we don't know if it's $A$ or $\neg A$." It says the question is flawed because it tries to apply one rule to all experiences. The true metaphysical nature, in this view, is this very contingency. The answer to "is noesis shareable?" is "It depends on which noesis." This stance dissolves the binary problem by introducing a spectrum. The sameness of experience is not a priori impossible (as in $\neg A$) nor simply assumed (as in $A$); it is a contingent event that becomes less and less likely as the phenomenological object increases in complexity.

# III

### Objection: Your Defence of Contingency Is Metaphysical, Not Methodological

A critic might argue that adopting the Contingency stance amounts to a covert metaphysical claim about the nature of experiential sameness—one that goes beyond the evidence and violates our own insistence on epistemic humility.

A crucial clarification: my defence of the *Contingency* stance should be understood as primarily methodological rather than metaphysical. That is, I am not claiming that *Contingency* is more likely to be true about the ultimate nature of experiential sameness—the incommensurability problem makes any such claim epistemically inaccessible. Rather, I am arguing that *Contingency* is the most pragmatically rational stance to adopt given our epistemic constraints. To assume $A$ (universal shareability) or $\neg A$ (universal non-shareability) is to make a totalising metaphysical commitment that goes beyond what our evidence can support. The incommensurability problem shows that neither stance can be verified or falsified; both remain equally possible at the level of metaphysical reality. What distinguishes them is not truth-value but methodological utility. Though it might be argued, in what would perhaps be an ironical situation, that methodological functionalism itself is metaphysical to the extent that it attempts to describe that the best way of describing reality is by being humble on the basis of what does not lead to inconsistencies. This is a view of metaphysics

explored in Lowe (2002), where even a purported non-metaphysical view itself can be metaphysical. To that extent, I am willing to submit to metaphysical contours of my otherwise methodological intentions in the proposed philosophy. I do not believe this causes any problems, for the metaphysical position of methodological functionalism (if there even is one) is that it answers to its own recursion: so long as it leads to no inconsistencies, one may grant it away.

### Objection: Sameness of Noesis Does Not Guarantee Sameness of Qualia

One may object that phenomenal character could differ even when intentional structure is held constant, and thus sameness of noesis does not ensure sameness of qualia. This objection appeals to familiar considerations such as inverted spectra or sub-intentional variations in experience.

A terminological clarification: I adopt a phenomenal intentionalist position wherein phenomenal character is determined by intentional structure. Thus, sameness of noesis entails sameness of qualia. If two noetic acts are token-identical, structurally and constitutively the same in phenomenologically relevant respects, they must yield identical qualia. Note that in light of epistemic inaccessibility and the consequent incommensurability problem, one cannot verify whether two noetic acts are even the same or not. Despite this, I hold that, *in the event* that such confirmation could occur, the sameness of noesis should naturally lead to sameness of qualia. To deny this posits phenomenal difference without experiential ground, violating the principle that phenomenal differences must be anchored in experiential structure.

## Conclusion

The question of whether two individuals can experience the same qualia reveals more about the limits of justificatory regress than about consciousness itself. The incommensurability problem demonstrates that metaphysical surety about experiential sameness is epistemically inaccessible. Rather than assert what we cannot know, we ought to adopt methodological functionalism: halt metaphysical inquiry when further justification ceases to be pragmatically functional, and embrace epistemic humility towards transcendent truths. The Contingency stance, holding that sameness is a spectrum dependent on noetic complexity, emerges as the most methodologically defensible position. It neither overstates our capacities nor forecloses metaphysical possi-

bilities. It accepts that simple, biologically anchored experiences permit meaningful sameness whilst complex, culturally saturated experiences may not.

Methodological functionalism does not end in scepticism but in careful metaphysical humility. We cannot know whether two noeses perfectly align, but we recognise varying degrees of constraint, regularity, and divergence that make some alignments more plausible than others. Philosophy's strength lies not in attaining certainty but in its capacity for self-correction through humility before the transcendent. Functional adequacy, not metaphysical surety, should govern our treatment of intersubjective phenomenology.

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