

andrew inkpin, *disclosing the world: on the phenomenology of language*

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Contemporary phenomenological texts tend to rely on close reading of a handful of key figures in the history of the phenomenological movement. This is true generally but not universally of course. If you travel in certain circles you are likely to hear other philosophers wonder why, if contemporary phenomenologists have something important to say, they don't just say it instead of subjecting us to another version of "Merleau-Ponty on Heidegger on Husserl's departure from realist phenomenology" or some such thing. Some contemporary phenomenologists have responded to this challenge by claiming that the endless reading, re-reading, re-counting, re-imagining and re-interpreting of historical moments in the phenomenological literature is an essential part of doing phenomenology. Phenomenology as a discipline can't help but depart from a circuitous taking up of its own history as a discipline. A host of other responses are possible as well. Some might point to the balance achieved by canonical figures who, while not ignoring history, certainly are not scared to carve out new paths. Others might take a few well established phenomenological insights (e.g. the shallowness of a phenomenalist picture of experience, the irreducibility of the lived body, etc.) and apply them to contemporary debates. Whatever the response, there is a standing challenge to anyone writing phenomenology today, that is, how to balance the reading of phenomenology with the doing of phenomenology. Interestingly for what is to follow, there is a parallel challenge faced by contemporary Wittgensteinian philosophy.

Andrew Inkpin's *Disclosing the World* treads the uneasy line between two positions, that of a constructive phenomenologist and a scholarly exegete, or in the author's words, the aim is "to strike the right balance—that is, to do justice to the merits of each position while maintaining sufficient direction to avoid mere commentary." (p.15)

Inkpin's constructive phenomenology is both ambitious and restrained. It is ambitious in offering nothing less than a philosophical grounding for the study of language in general by means of an examination of speakers' experience of language. Inkpin attempts to explain how linguistic events mean what they do and function the way they do by having a particular formal structure and by being a certain kind of meaningful behaviour. This project is restrained insofar as the author tries to avoid the transcendental speculation, the stylistic excesses and the too-eager condemnation of science that is not infrequently found in the genre. He calls out the heroes of the text - Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein—for exaggerations, ambiguities, missed opportunities and unnecessary complexities.

The ambition and the restraint of this project is exemplified in its stated aim, to advance "a *minimalist* conception phenomenological method, defined by the basic commitment ... to describe accurately how things appear or manifest themselves." (p.6) More specifically, the aim as it is related to phenomenology of language will be "to identify factors that make language what it is." (p.8) However, since a minimal phenomenology limits itself to features of language that are noninferentially accessible, the product of this kind of phenomenological description will have limited or no explanatory power, though it will provide the explanandum that the science and metaphysics of language must account for. This means that while the phenomenology of language may and should operate as a constraint on explanatory linguistic theories, it cannot replace them or choose among them (except insofar as some theories explain the phenomenological data and some do not). This minimal phenomenology of language unfolds exegetically. The scholarship is dense, elaborate, and satisfying for those who have a taste for it. Defence of the main ideas is never far from the close reading of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Saussure and Wittgenstein, which means that there is arguably very little that is dispensable in the book. You can't skip the sections devoted to the finer points of translating Heideggerian terminology and still expect to understand the substantive claims advanced.

First, a phenomenological framework is established from a detailed consideration of Heidegger's treatment of language as both continuous with other forms of meaningful behaviour and at the same time as something uniquely linguistic (p.89). If this dual aspect is taken seriously, it results in a picture of language as possessing a dual function: pointing to features of the world and achieving things in the world. The former, termed the "presentational sense," is fleshed out with a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's remarks on style and his appropriation of Saussure. The latter function, termed "pragmatic sense," is fleshed out by tracing Wittgenstein's journey from a rules-based conception of meaning to a practice-based conception of meaning, concluding in his "language-game" device.

The basic function of language, of which the presentational and pragmatic senses are parts, is termed "disclosure." Language is embedded in "the broader phenomenon of disclosure" (p.25) which relates to "how the grasp humans have of the world around them takes on a determinate form—that is, how particular entities are picked out or individuated against the background of Significance." (p.30) The interpretive question which eventually gives rise to the dual function account of language is this: how deeply are linguistic structures embedded in the disclosure? The question is resolved by showing how language participates in understanding and is not just a tool used to express an understanding of things, that is, language is simultaneously a way of achieving practical feats and a way of grasping the world.

Initially, it is tempting to equate the presentational / pragmatic distinction with the present-at-hand / ready-to-hand, or at least to allow the former to piggy back on the latter. This is not quite right because linguistic structures, as I understand the argument, are meant to be operative prior to the present-at-hand / ready-to-hand distinction coming into play (p.50). Similarly, the present-at-hand pertains to determinate and context-independent properties of objects, whereas the presentational sense works to disclose context-dependent features of the world as well. A close approximation to the presentational / pragmatic distinction might be the semantics / pragmatics distinction, given a specifically phenomenological interpretation. Thinking about it like that might be fruitful in understanding the central distinction in Inkipin's phenomenology, though there are obvious pitfalls. It would be wrong, for instance, to suppose this phenomenology can be mapped onto contemporary debates in analytic philosophy of language, as it's explicitly designed to undermine the foundation of those debates (see Chapter 9).

I admit to finding the presentational sense in particular quite difficult to understand. Part II uses Merleau-Ponty and Saussure to explicate the presentational sense, and contains some of the most difficult discussion in the book. The presentational sense is “a kind of sense that underlies [linguistic expressions] capacity to present features of the world in an articulate manner” (p.84). The presentational sense accounts for the demonstrative function of disclosure, the way linguistic signs “point to” features of the world (p.69). My Wittgensteinian scruples lead me to suggest that if words “point to” features of the world, then they must do so in an ordinary sense. If that is the case, then these words are speech acts of a particular kind (“indications,” “pointings,” “demonstratives” or whatever) and one wonders why we should need an account of their meaning different from the pragmatic account. Inkipin does address this. He says, for instance, that while the presentational sense captures something important about language use, there can be empty and filled presentational acts, that is, some linguistic acts can simply fail to point to any features of the world (p.84). A pragmatic account does a good job dealing with this sort of speech - and Wittgenstein in particular is a connoisseur of the routine use of language in which the word’s “atmosphere” dissipates—but a different kind of account is required for novel or poetic forms of expression.

The pragmatic sense of linguistic signs is “the meaning or sense they have due to the respective roles they have as instruments in established practices.” (p.89) It is clear that Wittgenstein’s core ideas - language-games and forms of life—could bolster an account of pragmatic sense and assist in establishing its details. Inkipin provides an interesting and thorough route to this goal by following Wittgenstein’s trajectory from a rules-based conception of meaning (the calculus model) to a practice based conception of meaning (the language game model). My worry is that Wittgenstein sits only uneasily within a phenomenological framework. It is not so much a matter of fitting a square peg in a round hole as it is like fitting a large sponge into a small hole: it definitely fits, but doesn’t quite look the way it did before.

Inkipin writes “it is not necessary to establish that Wittgenstein understood himself as a ‘phenomenologist’. All that is required here is that his conception of language is compatible with a phenomenological approach.” He continues “Wittgenstein’s method of illuminating comparison generates an indirect commitment to the aim of phenomenological accountability.” (p.168) My contention is that many of Wittgenstein’s strategies do not meet the minimal condition of phenomenological accountability.

The story we are given in *Disclosing the World* regarding the transition from the calculus model to the language-game model goes like this: around the time of *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein was committed to a conception of language such that “what makes something ... meaningful is precisely the fact that it belongs to a rule-governed pattern of use” (p.178), or as Wittgenstein says, “Meaning is the role that word plays in the calculus.” At the same time, it was understood that this calculus model is only an idealisation, that it lacked fidelity to empirical reality, but that this was not a great problem. The model was not asserted as a systematic theory, but only an object of comparison, a schematic model designed to clarify misunderstandings. It is argued that “this nonthetic approach relies on an underlying conception of language as a means of comparison, which, although its empirical reality is not asserted, is obviously assumed to approximate well enough to the reality of language to dispel misunderstandings.” (p.180) By the time of *Philosophical Investigations*, the calculus model is finally abandoned because it is found to be incoherent. Incoherency is a different kind of problem from that of empirical infidelity, since “its intimation of ideal determinacy is precisely what sows the seeds of confusion.” (p.182)

That is the story presented, but here is the problem: although *Philosophical Investigations* does address severe confusions that might arise from an application of the calculus model, the text also implies that the incoherence of a picture is not that big a deal. If that picture is useful, if it dispels misunderstanding in some context (as we must assume it did if it was to be attractive in the first place), the fact that it creates confusion in some other context is not a reason to abandon the picture entirely, but it is a reason to prefer a different picture in that context. We see this frequently. The idea that thoughts are “in” the head is a picture repeated to us over and over in our language. Wittgenstein has a lot to say about its problematic characteristics but it is never abandoned or ruled out entirely (PI §427). Philosophy is not in the business of completely ruling out this sort of picture (§125). The same is true of the so-called Augustinian picture of language, which is given an appropriate context of use but not entirely repudiated. The same is even true of sense-data theory, the arch-bugbear of phenomenology, which is examined and acknowledged for both the situations it fits and those it doesn't. The pragmatic principle that useful pictures do not have to have general applicability, which is a feature of Wittgenstein's nonthetic methodology, means that theoretical incoherence is not fatal.

So what does this have to do with phenomenological accountability? The calculus model is acknowledged as an idealisation, and so has a tenuous relation to the phenomenological data irrespective of its general incoherence. If I am right about the situational applicability of philosophical pictures, their descriptive accuracy is an important consideration but may take a back seat to pragmatic usability or therapeutic effect. In other words, while perhaps some measure of phenomenological accountability is required to let the picture have enough intuitive force to be the least bit tempting, it doesn't follow that the greater the accuracy the more useful the picture. We might sometimes prefer the less phenomenologically accurate because it produces the specific kind of situational understanding required in a specific context.

If I am right about Wittgenstein, then we can see in greater relief the tension between the goals of the constructive phenomenologist and the goals of the scholarly exegete. Inkipin is open about which identity gives way first:

Should it, however, turn out that this view is not Wittgenstein's own, then my response would simply be that it should have been, that working out the implications of the language-game analogy ought to have led him to the view presented here. (p.164)

I think this attitude is correct and shows its author has his priorities straight. *Disclosing the World* uses Wittgenstein in interesting and fruitful ways, and the scholarship it contains on the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty can be quite exciting at times, if one is excited by that sort of thing. However, the final chapters dealing with the implications of Inkipin's phenomenology for philosophical realism, contemporary philosophy of language, and cognitive science leave one with a clear idea of what is at stake philosophically and scientifically. In light of this, I do wonder whether the advances made in *Disclosing the World* might be more accessibly presented unencumbered by fine-grained textual analysis of long dead philosophers.

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