



Cloaked in the Light: Language, Consciousness, and the Problem of Description

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Abstract

*This paper deals with the implications of the limitations of language for phenomenological description. For corroboration, it relies on a section in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* in which he gives his most prolonged explanation of what he calls "the essence" of his understanding of "phenomenalism and perspectivism" (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 299). The author contends that Nietzsche saw better into this problem than any other major theorist before or since, and that his understanding goes to the heart of things phenomenological. In support of this claim, examples are offered from two philosophers the author regards as most representative of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, of what seems to be evidence that neither saw into the problem as well as Nietzsche – Merleau-Ponty, in fact, seeming to have missed it almost altogether, and Heidegger seeing in it a spectre he was anxious to put to rest!*

Given that language provides us with a special kind of sightedness, and given that this seeing through language is fundamentally different from perception, how can one avoid the conclusion that, in language, phenomena are transformed? This is the central question confronted in this paper. It is argued that description is an act of creation and that, as such, its products should never be mistaken for that from out of which they are created. The mind's eye and the eye itself are separate organs, and to imagine that we see the same way in language as we do in sensory perception is to repeat the errors of rationalism. The world spoken is a projection, a facade obscuring the true reality of the phenomena projected. Thus, even though directing the light of description on things is undeniably a way of revealing them, it also has a way of concealing them.

Our true experiences are not garrulous. They could not
communicate themselves if they wanted to: they lack words.
(Nietzsche, 1888/1990, p. 94)

A Few Words of Introduction

This paper is intended as a meditation on language, consciousness, and phenomenological description, exploring questions which have concerned countless others, but which this paper contends were best

addressed in Nietzsche. Should this paper fail to meet every academic criterion, hopefully it will, by satisfying a more important need, be granted something of an exemption. Husserl's return to "the things themselves", or what Merleau-Ponty describes as "that world which precedes knowledge, of which

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knowledge always speaks” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. ix), is not reached through erudition but through reflection. While erudition is impatient with beginnings, and is sure to find “clichéd” anything that does not add to its inventory of knowledge, reflection never tires of revisiting the source of its inspiration, and finds in beginnings the opportunity to observe more clearly, and by a more nuanced understanding to take better possession of its understanding. All the knowledge in the world does not a phenomenologist make. Phenomenology arose from the awareness that things arrived at are not “the things themselves”, and if this awareness is not held fast and placed at the centre of its method, phenomenology is sure to stray.

This paper takes for granted that, in addressing phenomenologists, there is no need to account in detail for claims such as that seeing is preferable to conceiving, that the givens of the world as experienced in perception and acted out in motility are prior to any thoughts that we might have of them, and that the givens of thought are prior to concepts and all the other miscellaneous constructs of culture. But, further to this, this paper would emphasize that concepts – or at least those that most concern phenomenology – are products of language: and what this means is that, for phenomenology, verbal expression is not only problematic, but represents its greatest danger. For the reader to appreciate this paper, he or she must have lived for some time in the awareness of the unspoken world of private experience and of how it is an order of corporeal connections which is fundamentally different from the world that we know when we enter into discourse with others.

Nietzsche’s Proposition

Description is a making conscious, and consciousness as it is usually understood is not found in things, but is reached in pointing things out to others – a simple enough insight, but one which, as Nietzsche (1882/1974) realized, has far-ranging implications. “Consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings” (p. 298), and “this conscious thinking *takes the form of words*” (p. 299). Nietzsche’s suggestion is that consciousness “does not really belong to man’s individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature” (p. 299). He would “surmise” that its “subtlety and strength” is “always proportionate to the strength of a man’s (or animal’s) capacity for communication”, and that this “in turn” is “proportionate to the *need for communication*” (p. 298). Although Nietzsche seems to suggest that consciousness has expanded beyond its former range, he makes it clear that the largest part of human experience never reaches consciousness, and that that

which becomes conscious is known only in a reduced manner:

Owing to the nature of animal consciousness, the world of which we can become conscious is only a surface-and sign-world, a world that is made common and meaner; whatever becomes conscious becomes by the same token shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, sign, herd signal; all becoming conscious involves a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities, and generalization. (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 299)

In his uncompromising way, Nietzsche does not mince words. But, if we follow his finger in the direction indicated, we will come up against a problem that has long plagued Western thought. Heidegger (1927/1962) has some idea of this when, in *Being and Time*, he laments the turn that philosophy took in Aristotle where the “*logic*’ of the *logos*” “is left undifferentiated and uncontrasted with other possibilities of Being” (p. 203). Still, if not the only way, the “*logos*”, for Heidegger, is a perfectly legitimate, and even the preferred, way of coming to terms with things.¹ In fact, a reader cannot go far wrong in *always* assuming that, for Heidegger, “being” is a product of language. To be sure, in what he terms “idle talk”, the “*logos*” loses its way and “what is said-in-the-talk gets understood; but what the talk is about is understood only approximately and superficially” (p. 212). Language nevertheless clearly has its own special place in “authentic historicity”² (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 443). Heidegger does not dispute the place which the “*logos*” assumes in Western culture, and, considering the intellectual capital that we have expended and continue to expend on it, this is none too surprising. Our way is the way that can be spoken,³ but this does not mean that verbalization is the only way, or is even the way that

¹ Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 196: “[I]n the decisive period when ancient ontology was beginning, the *logos* functioned as the *only* clue for obtaining access to that which authentically is and for defining the Being of such entities.”

² Heidegger’s authenticity is a curious synthesis of cultural heritage and the individual that he arrived at by working backwards from Nietzsche. In this, he is indebted to Nietzsche very much like Kant in his synthetic judgments *a priori* was to Hume.

³ This is not true of all intellectual traditions. Taoism does not show the same respect for words, and, due to the influence of Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, Japanese intellectuals typically regard logic with distrust if not distaste.

we know best, and putting things into words can even be a rather impotent way of knowing that adds nothing to our knowledge.

Phenomenology and the Point Not Taken

Most of our knowledge does not involve speech at all. The artisan does not resort to language in his work, but draws on an unspoken source of judgment that practice provides; after mastering a procedure, the artisan, with tool in hand, applies it to the material and learns to anticipate its response to his touch. Although educators everywhere will disagree, long-winded explanations do not really facilitate hands-on application, nor is the use of technical terms proof of understanding. One learns, for instance, to drive a car by taking the steering wheel in hand and testing the car's response, learning to read distance, and over time discovering the parameters of car and road. We have no need for words to discover the whither and wherefore of any operation; but, in direct contrast, in order to discover the whither and wherefore of words, a reference to the operation being performed is absolutely essential, insofar as it takes a prior knowledge or at least intimation of an operation for words to take on meaning. Words do not play an essential part in any nonverbal act, and, rather than illuminate, they are more like a soothing musical accompaniment that is played alongside of practice and experience to assure us that we remain in contact with those around us.

A picture is worth a thousand words, especially if the picture is found in the mind's eye, and that is probably why Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) equated consciousness with thought and thought with verbalization. "All thought of something is at the same time self-consciousness" (p. 371), and "thought tends toward expression as towards its completion ... the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name" (p. 177). But surely Merleau-Ponty cannot mean that *all* thought completes itself in expression? Only one particular and rather limited kind of thought is directed at speech. In chess, for example, thought is not completed in words, but in checkmate. As in every kind of nonverbal thinking, skill in chess has nothing to do with reaching an understanding in words ... as if self-reflection were part of a grandmaster's game. In mathematics, thought completes itself in an equation, and, in nuclear physics, in a nuclear reaction; for a civil engineer, thought reaches its completion in a bridge; for a chef, in a soufflé. But, more to the point, in these modes of thinking, thought is opaque. As Nietzsche (1882/1974) said – "man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it; the thinking that rises to consciousness is

the smallest part of all of this – the most superficial and worst part" (p. 299). When thought does not make expression its object – which is most of the time – it operates in a place where neither light penetrates nor sound escapes.

Thought is thought in any of the forms that it takes – a withdrawal from involvement in the world that removes perception and motility from context and frames them in circumspection. But thought that makes conscious can have only one object. The sightedness of verbalization comes from directing thought to the field of experience and waiting there for the arrival of representation in words. Placing attention on experience *for the purpose* of displaying it to others is what sets consciousness into motion. As with patients in psychotherapy who are able to recall details of their dreams better after they are asked to write them down, it is in the act of reporting events to others that we enter into consciousness.

Nietzsche believed that, "fundamentally, all our actions are altogether incomparably personal, unique and infinitely individual", and, on being "translated back into the perspective of the herd", are taken up in completely different terms (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 299). On the other hand, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of consciousness, it often appears that he does not recognize any connection to language, or any incongruity between actions and words. As we have seen, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of thought as consciousness,⁴ he clearly means – at least in this particular context – thought that is directed towards speech; but what can he possibly mean when he speaks the same of motility? Merleau-Ponty is thoroughly correct in many things, but one has to pause at the assertion that "Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body" (1945/1962, p. 139). In fairness, there is a kind of consciousness of the body,⁵ insofar as "a movement is learned when the body has understood it"; and, by the same token, thought is also a kind of consciousness, if by that what is meant is an operation which discovers coherence and direction within itself. But such coherence and direction is an altogether different matter from what is usually meant by consciousness, and especially that which we are talking about when we enter into description.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 371: "Self-consciousness is the very being of mind in action."

⁵ The body has its own mode of awareness: bumping one's head is one sure way to become conscious of a low doorway, and it is through the consciousness of the body, and not of words, that a boxer knows to avoid the punch that has been launched at his head.

Merleau-Ponty places the speaking subject at the very door of “the things themselves” – but Heidegger does not stop there! Or what else is one to make of his “*a priori*” of “the ready-to-hand”, “foresightedness” or “fore-conception”? He clearly sees that our involvements in the world fashion concepts even before they are articulated in speech, but, for some reason, he chooses to call these involvements “articulation”: “Articulation lies before our making any thematic assertion about it” (Heidegger, 1945/1962, p. 190). This is a most peculiar assertion for Heidegger to make if by this he means that, by taking a thing in hand, we are already speaking of it! Merleau-Ponty places the speaking subject into the body, but Heidegger would go one step further and give “the things themselves” a voice! In the conscious body and “foresightedness”, neither Merleau-Ponty nor Heidegger hesitates at putting the “*logos*” into a most dubious contiguity with “the things themselves”. Could this be because they believed that any further distance would endanger that most treasured article of faith of a descriptive psychology, the transparency of experience?

It is not the belief here that Nietzsche necessarily disputed the openness of phenomena to description, but, if one accepts the absolute incommensurability of that which is individual with that which is communicable, description becomes problematic. If one posits a “unique” individuality and a “perspective of the herd” that are in fundamental opposition, one well might come to the unhappy conclusion that this means that we are forever trapped in our subjectivity and condemned to eternal isolation from others. In answer to this, I would like, firstly, to ask – what exactly is so horrifying about this being alone in personal experience? And, secondly, how could there be any satisfaction in entering into communication with others without the experience of being cut off from them? Is not solitude the ground out of which companionship arises? The spectre of an individuality that is hermetically sealed off from intercourse with others is something that only presents itself to those who live in fear of what lurks in the dark and would sleep with the lights on.

This paper is not going to dispute the possibility of a descriptive psychology, but it would challenge any notion of a specialized education that frees us from our fetters and allows us to pass over to some shared place where we can all frolic in the sunlight. An academic community might be brought around to a “perspective”, but it generally does not give out prizes to those who are quickest to make out phenomena. Making visible that which has not been made visible yet is a totally different enterprise from what scholars customarily practice! Barring a few rare exceptions, it

is usually the scholar with the best memory for the shadows of learned discourse and their customary sequences who lords it over others.⁶ Access to the phenomenal is not reached through knowledge, but through reflection, and reflection is achieved by withdrawal from communal concerns and by nurturing a side of our nature that is discovered only in solitude. Seeing through one’s own eyes is not even such a difficult trick – such sightedness being the birthright of all of us – but the sticking point in description comes in making others see!

Speaking Things into Existence

Nietzsche spoke of consciousness as a product of language, and from there it is no great leap to suggest that it is forged in the exercise of power. In Nietzsche’s words, “Genuine philosophers ... are commanders and legislators: they say, ‘Thus it shall be!’... Their ‘knowing’ is creating, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is – their will to power” (Nietzsche, 1886/1989, p. 136). Speaking in much the same terms, Heidegger, referring to Heraclitus, makes it clear that “*Polemos* and *logos* are the same” (Heidegger, 1935/1959, p. 62).

The struggle meant here is the original struggle, for it gives rise to the contender as such; it is not a mere assault on something already there. It is this conflict that first projects and develops what had hitherto been unheard of, unsaid and unthought. The battle is then sustained by the creators, poets, thinkers, statesmen. Against the overwhelming chaos they set up the barrier of their work, and in their work they capture the world thus opened up. (Heidegger, 1935/1959, p. 62)

Heidegger follows Nietzsche almost to the word, with the obvious difference that, where Nietzsche sees through and exposes, Heidegger “legislates”. This “being” that Nietzsche shows as fundamentally empty is something in which Heidegger locates “a question” of which “the destiny of the earth is being decided” (Heidegger, 1935/1959, p. 42). It is almost as if Heidegger takes Nietzsche’s irreverent joke of grammar as “the metaphysics of the people” (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 300), dresses it up in the appropriate philosophical terms, and reconstitutes it as a philosophical system! We will leave it to the reader to decide whether Heidegger’s ambition got the better of his honesty, and whether insight into

⁶ A veiled reference to Plato’s allegory of the cave.

being as a product of language and the instinct for “rank and domination” (Heidegger, 1935/1959, p. 133) leaves metaphysics intact in the way that the ancients understood it. But how can any construct, least of all of a product of language and contention, be authentic? Is not this kind of speaking things into existence rather something more like its exact opposite?

As we have tried to show, when Merleau-Ponty speaks of thought, what he is talking about is a special kind of thought that enters into consciousness to complete itself in words. He refers to “secondary speech which renders a thought already acquired, and originating speech which brings it into existence in the first place, for ourselves and then for others” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 389). And, although he does not speak of the prevalence of “secondary” over “originating speech”, he makes it quite clear that it is his intention to “re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world” against “empiricism” and “idealism”, both of which he saw as misunderstandings arising from our estrangement from “originating speech” (p. 390).⁷

Here we cannot resist pointing out that, even though this “originating speech” Merleau-Ponty speaks of might be taken for theoretical musing rather than as something known from first-hand experience, this kind of speaking into existence is not restricted to some long lost golden age in the distant past, and it does not take a specialist in dead languages to discover its meaning. “Originating speech” is common even in mass culture, and can be observed in all phases of life if one only has eyes for it! Its practice, most certainly, is impaired – firstly, by reason that cultural units are large and the voice of the individual is small and almost never carries to all corners of a spoken language, and, secondly, because, with the standardization of language, speakers are far less free to improvise on its themes than they were in the past. Even in the often hidebound world of academia, words maintain their primal creative power, despite the distinct pressures exerted there to restrict freedom of expression. Academia is in many ways a world apart, and, as such, it may retain some of the dynamics of a true community; but, as a microcosm of the world at large, it is subject to the same forces. And if, in practice, academics sometimes

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 390: “This operation (bending the resources of constituted language to some fresh usage) must be considered as an ultimate fact, since any explanation of it – whether empiricist, reducing new meaning to given ones; or idealist, positing an absolute knowledge immanent in the most primitive form of knowledge – would amount to a denial of it.”

display a certain freedom, they are generally careful to employ terminology which demonstrates solidarity with their fellow academics; and, as elites engaged in the struggle to set the standards, they are usually unapologetic promoters of standardization.

The exercise of power over words involves irreverence with a proper measure of arrogance ... traits not necessarily characteristic of scholars. Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty understood “originating speech” when he bragged, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less. ... The question is which is to be master – that’s all” (Carroll, 1872/2001, p. 225). Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, in a scholarly and far less playful way, demonstrates that words can mean practically anything that the writer intends, given a reader who is willing to listen, absorb, and take hold of the writer’s intended meaning. While words are employed in a masterful way even in the corridors of academia, originating speech has, for a large part, been relegated to the fringes of society: rural and inner city dialects, high school slang, anywhere that a curtain has been drawn between practice and the edicts of institutionalized usage. In particular, among the young, words still retain some of their original creative dynamics. Language is not and never can be of the depths, and even in the grim struggle of legislation, language remains a surface. However, speaking into existence is creation, and the most salient characteristic of a creative act is the pure enjoyment taken in it.

Heidegger’s depiction of originating speech as “conflict” and of conflict as that which “first gave rise to position and order and rank” (Heidegger, 1935/1959, p. 62) brings to mind the backroom wrangling of prescriptive grammarians over proper usage. One can only imagine a gathering of “language authorities”, puffed up with self-importance and contending with each other over some point of grammar until some kind of wolf-pack order of dominance is arrived at. Like most things, language forms can be made a point of contention, but language itself does not operate in that way. No, language is a surface, fluid in its natural state – and, as our proper element, it is our nature to ride its waves. As with any creative act, expression comes into existence in a flash of elation, and it is the allure of this selfsame euphoria that best explains how language forms take hold and multiply. The fun taken in language is infectious and is sure to spread among those who adopt a playful or irreverent attitude towards established forms.

Communication occurs at the surface, and it is only when something of our common experience finds

form in language and is offered up for sharing with others that we discover meaning in it. Not before! Art only occurs when it is framed and set up in a public place for exhibition. Beauty does not exist in “the things themselves”; rather, it is through the act of displaying them to others – or else having them displayed to us – that beauty takes form. In the same way, language is meaning, and all meaning is discovered in the dimension of interaction with others, which is to say at the surface. Meaning is not, nor ever can be, found in unspoken perception; but neither is it found in surface forms. Meaning occurs in an interplay between surface and that which lies beneath. It arrives when the hidden depths of as-of-yet-unconscious experience are brought up for display to others; and, like everything transitory, unless meaning is continuously recreated, it dissipates into nothingness. Without some kind of primal connection with corporeal existence, words become blanks, mere ciphers, empty picture frames.

Language as Artifice

Perhaps the problem of expression can be made clearer by turning our attention to nonverbal forms of communication such as music and art. Phenomenologists will insist on the priority of perception, and, because of this, might conclude that, in artistic expression, the artist simply lifts form from out of the world of perception and replicates it in oil on canvas. As compelling as this might sound in theory, it is simply not the way art operates. The painter knows artistic creation in far more concrete and workaday terms. In art, something like perception is discovered in its completed form, but its form, as such, is reached by entirely different means. In painting a picture, the artist does not fasten his eyes on the perceived world, nor is necessarily even aware of things as perceived, but, rather, thinks in terms of paint and canvas and the problems they pose; the artist devises a technique, replicating angles and distances, and lays out in his mind’s eye a systematic course of action which produces a desired effect. This is to say that the effect, like every act of creation, is experienced as a kind of miracle that is discovered only after hand is taken to canvas. Similarly, music can be conceived in purely formal or even mathematical terms without reference to the surface effect these cause: an algorithm that does not reveal itself as music until it is played out. What this shows is that art is artifice, but, more to the point, artifice that would suggest that form in a painting is somehow fundamentally different from form that is perceived. A painting participates in perception – there is no doubt of that – but, somehow, it simultaneously maintains an independent identity as something artificial.

Somehow, through the cultural conventions of art, the world of perception is accessed – but nobody ever mistakes representations for the things which they represent. A cartoon representation can be highly stylized and highly simplified and yet still maintain a highly corporeal connection. Think of Japanese erotic *manga*. And one only has to consider the extreme stylization of so-called “primitive art” to realize that style is hardly a distinguishing feature of modern civilization, but rather the artifice that is fundamental to *all* culture. Simplification and stylization is the means through which we enter into and maintain a communal connection, and it might even be said that style is the means by which communication is achieved. But, no matter the form that it takes, style is something quite different from the thing stylized! Think of dance and how, through style, a simple motor operation is turned into an act of communication.

In dance, not to mention art, the symbolic and the symbolized can be nearly indistinguishable, with form in a painting resembling perception and the form in dance, athleticism. While it is usually immediately apparent what art and dance are drawn from, in speech, outside of onomatopoeic expressions, the symbolic form gives no hint of its content. Still, what holds true for art and dance holds true for verbal communication. Speech is simultaneously the symbolic and the symbolized; it is a kind of verbal dance in which meaning coalesces around the symbolic act. This is to say that speech is a surface, and onto this surface display that which is referred to, the perceptual world of our corporeal existence, is projected.

The Phenomenal as Individual

Now is perhaps the time to speak of Merleau-Ponty, of “the perceiving mind” as “an incarnated mind”, and the insight that should be recognized as the fountainhead of everything phenomenological:

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A “corporeal or postural schema” gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or “motor projects”, radiates from us to our environment Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to shape our perception of things. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1964, p. 5)

In language, as we have been trying to show, the symbolic is fused with the symbolized: the artifice of communication draws its meaning from our “bodily situation.”⁸ The body is just that, and what makes a body “body” is an autonomic existence that is independent of consciousness: our heart beats and pushes blood through our veins, our sexuality rises up in desire for its object, and our heart chooses to love or not to love independent of conscious intent. Merleau-Ponty thought of the body in the most concrete and, yes, literal of terms, but the real issue of this insight comes in the realization that many things normally not considered of the body are actually its products. If one takes seriously Merleau-Ponty’s declaration that perception is prior, one has to recognize that it is from here that all things flow. Thought derives its structure from these same “motor projects”, imagination derives its forms from these “affective movements”, and language as a whole maintains itself in connection to all of these things. But to this it is necessary to add that body does not emerge as body until it meets up with the world. The as-of-yet unspoken is created by taking things in hand; it is discovered in the awakening of latent passion, when love finds its object, or ambition confronts its rival.

Perhaps to a phenomenologist all of this will seem clichéd and hardly worth repeating, but I wish to be as emphatically phenomenological as possible, out of fear lest at this point perchance I stray. When Heidegger (1927/1962) speaks of things as being understood “in terms of a totality of involvements” (p. 191), and when Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) speaks of “existence” as “the very process whereby the hitherto meaningless takes on meaning” (p. 169), this “totality of involvements” and this “existence” are none other than that which Nietzsche speaks of as being “incomparably personal, unique, and infinitely individual”. Further, if we take seriously this “totality of involvements” and “existence” as an *originating process*, then we can arrive at no other conclusion than that each and every one of us is enclosed in a personal history which is “infinitely” our very own. Although our existence is lived out among others, and even though, when we take things in hand, we generally do so in a manner that is consistent with the norms of the community we are born into, needless to say, no one of us lives out his or her life in the exact same manner as any other individual, or has a history of “involvements” that are exactly the same as those

⁸ In connection to “bodily situations”, we are speaking, of course, of language in very simple terms; in many if not most things – in mathematics, grammar, metaphysics and the like – words maintain a primal connection to perception in only an indirect manner.

of anyone else.

As Nietzsche said, we are “solar systems” to ourselves, and, “imprisoned” as we are in a unique set of circumstances, by a most uncompromising necessity, “We sit in our net, we spiders, and whatever we may catch in it, we can catch nothing at all except that which allows itself to be caught in precisely *our* net” (Nietzsche, 1882/1997, p. 117). Any claim that we are “imprisoned” in our own subjectivity seems in violation of almost every belief that phenomenologists hold dear. But, if one takes seriously the proposition that we are all circumscribed by the limits of our personal experience, the question becomes: how does one “solar system”, so to speak, make contact with others? If I am indeed a world apart, then, when my subjectivity wishes to discover other such “solar systems” – whose existence, after all, something more than preponderance of evidence points to – then I must do so indirectly. In communication with others, what I first come up against is a symbolic world which serves as an interface that we hold in common, and this symbolic world is just as Nietzsche describes it, a “surface-and sign-world” that is “a great and thorough corruption” and a “reduction to superficialities”.

It is in language that we enjoy a shared existence; and, paradoxically, this language, which is a precondition for meaning, provides the conditions for its almost inevitable demise.⁹ A tool takes on a meaning that is entirely different depending on the person who takes in it hand, and our bodily involvements with things differ greatly from individual to individual. A sextant is something quite different for a ship’s captain than it is for the craftsman who constructed it, and quite another thing altogether for the person who designed it. And then there are any number of landlubbers who, having never touched a sextant, or never having even set foot on a ship, will find the word almost completely devoid of meaning. And yet, even though this sextant that the captain takes in hand and the sextant that the landlubber reads about in novels have almost nothing in common except for the word that they share, somehow they are accepted as the same. From the aurora borealis, the immortal soul, to Einstein’s theory of relativity, we speak in the most familiar of terms of things with which we have had no contact and of which we can have only the vaguest notion! From out of our limitations, each of us cobbles together something of our experience which, for better or for worse, matches the thing commonly spoken about, and nothing other than this “for better

⁹ A paradox which Heidegger long struggled with and with which he arguably never came to terms.

or for worse” constitutes its “essence”!

The bridging of our private existence with that of others has never been a concern for humankind. Not authenticity, but inauthenticity! Now, as always, words are that from behind which things are hidden. Even for the most circumspect, the confirmation of an authentic meaning behind surface forms hardly rates among our more pressing concerns; rather, our lives are characterized by a long and often desperate attempt at reproducing the words employed by those around us. Existence is where existence goes, and we are careful not to stray far from what Nietzsche ungraciously calls “the herd”! Our highest priority lies in being with others, and we are careful to avert our eyes from anything which might draw us from their midst. As Heidegger might say, the gravitational pull of others draws us away from our authentic selves, and it is in the siren song of words that the “they” exerts its pull. Words are a melody that we cannot get out of our heads, and this music is the stuff which constitutes our reality: a reality that, like the latest fashion, is constantly evolving. We sit on our lily pads in our ponds, listening to the croaking of all the other frogs, and when we are able to respond in kind, we call that knowledge!

Because words strive for lyricism, they often skirt the boundaries of reason, and, when left to themselves, would turn themselves into something pleasing to the ear but without substance. Words would sublimate themselves into pure melody if they did not maintain a primal connection to the things they refer to. As Nietzsche never tired of pointing out, humankind exists in near complete intoxication with this lyricism; nevertheless, when a word begins to lose its meaning, eventually, sooner or later, somebody is sure to notice its absence. There is more to human existence than style, and, in our discourse with others, we generally discover that their words *do* direct us somewhere, and that, in order to play our parts and say our lines on cue, we must locate *something* from out of our experience to substantiate the words used around us. It is difficult to imagine how language would even be possible at all if there were not a world that we held in common with others. It is from out of speech and in obedience to words that we *reach back* towards the phenomenal, and in language can be found, at every turn, a preponderance of evidence that life on other planets is, for the most part, the same as it is on our planet. Words are sustained by contact with the things they refer to, but this does not refute Nietzsche’s claim that they are “a great and thorough corruption, falsification, reduction to superficialities”. Words are incandescent nothings – but still, within these gossamer constructs can be detected the residue of unspoken experience.

Accessing the Unspoken

The world that we live in and the world that we speak are accessed in completely different manners, and, while the world of experience most certainly is prior, a “descriptive psychology” takes its departure from the other side of that divide. This returning to “the things themselves” in phenomenology is a reaching back towards things that we no longer have full access to. Things *are* what the body knows them as, and Heidegger was quite right to speak of them as the “ready-to-hand” and “present-at-hand” – but, with apologies to Heidegger, it is not the “ready-to-hand” but the “present-at-hand” which is remote and difficult to render in description. Our involvements with things determine meaning, and thus a tool, as a thing with which we are most involved, for that reason is something we know best.

There are two ways of comporting ourselves towards things: in thought and in imitation of others. In, say, tying a knot, one can reach insight into how the knot is arrived at, but blind imitation is far more common. Fathers will literally lay their hands on their sons’ hands and guide them through the procedure of tying their shoes, a movement of fingers which is performed without even an understanding of how the knot is achieved. Description is not a matter of taking things in hand, but still it is a putting of oneself in the place of the other person for the purpose of showing the other the whereby of some action. It is here, in this age-old relationship of father and son, master and apprentice, mentor and the mentored, that description arises. Description is generally a *substitute* for thought. In description, consciousness enters into the motility of the body and attempts to bring to the surface what it finds there to make it available for *imitation*.¹⁰ There is nothing unnatural in the describing subject entering into the ready-to-hand in order to display it to others in words. However, things on which no action is performed are generally not the stuff of description, but of poetry. The “present-at-hand” in the “secret affective movements” of Merleau-Ponty is not usually accessed directly, but is made visible to others by means of symbolism: which is to say a making visible that is also a covering up.

Heidegger dwelt at length on the existential preconditions for being, and, if “thrownness” is to be taken seriously, then we have to recognize that

¹⁰ Here is probably the reason Merleau-Ponty equated thought with consciousness. The thinking subject and the describing subject occupy a very similar relation to things. Both are of an action to be taken, the former of the act performed, and the latter of the act of putting this into words.

description does not enjoy any kind of special exemption, and is held fast in the bonds which connect us to others. For the speaking subject, “the things themselves” must be regarded as being existentially remote, and, “tranquilized” in the “they” consciousness, how could it be possible for description to cross over to the other side? Pure description would be a kind of seeing *without* “anxiety in the face of death” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 298), a miraculous descent into the underworld with a torch that description especially provides for that purpose. Pushing consciousness into places where it is loath to go clearly takes some kind of concerted effort, and, when taken by assault, “the things themselves” are not always sure to respond. Any real bringing to light involves more than simple attention. In the anaesthetized embrace of others we are shut off from things, but this is only because, all too often, we purposefully *ignore* the call that arises from elsewhere: we close our ears to any knowing which is not reached through the mediation of those around us ... or, more accurately, legislated by those above us.

The kind of seeing that brings sightedness into existence involves a hidden mechanism which is something like what we speak of as inspiration, a dawning which rises to consciousness without our intentions playing any part. Heidegger spoke of this unseen mechanism as “death”, a most peculiar account of a process which might be as easily described as euphoria¹¹ (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 218). From inside the “they” consciousness, the promptings of solitude might be experienced as “death”; but, from within solitude, what is felt are the promptings of expression, and such promptings feel more like elation.¹² Still, despite Heidegger’s profound difference in temperament, style and approach, he testifies along with Nietzsche to something lurking in the shadows which is not of “the herd”, but which draws us out of the “they” consciousness and transports us to a place free from the oppressive presence of others. This fearsome place, the existence of which “the herd” does not acknowledge except to slander, is something that all

¹¹ A passage from Nietzsche that students of Heidegger would well consider: “A: ‘You are moving away fast and faster from the living; soon they will strike your name from their rolls.’ B: ‘That is the only way to participate in the privilege of the dead.’ A: ‘What privilege?’ B: ‘To die no more.’”

¹² I would point to dreams as the best evidence of spontaneous self-disclosure. It is almost as if consciousness distils dreams from out of the solitude of sleep to open them up for expression.

of us probably have an inkling of, but from which we are careful to avert our gaze. The call of “the things themselves” is something that most of us choose to ignore, and for very good reason! Perhaps what “the herd” finds offensive in originality is, as Nietzsche believed, that they see in it something at which their mediocrity fails. Certainly, failure to bring others around to the as-of-yet-unrecognized can have very serious consequences. Still, perhaps what the “they” consciousness finds so terrible in this kind of “egoism” is the uncanny smell of death and a fear of that which lurks on the other side.

If description is possible at all, it must be because of something in our nature that is not of “the herd”. Still, the speaking subject is firmly anchored on the side of speech, and description finds completion in a “sign-world” which has already been spoken into existence. In deference to Merleau-Ponty, the speaking subject speaks experience by means of a body of hidden corporeal connections, but these connections rise to consciousness as concepts. Description has one foot in the spoken even when it maintains a connection to what lies beneath, and this means, by the strictest necessity, that, even should description take its departure from “the things themselves”, it ends up in the public arena as concepts. There are many kinds of concepts, and any attempt to sort them out is completely beyond this paper’s scope. Mathematical concepts, to name one kind, most certainly do not participate in speech, but rather are almost like tools, a means by which we take things in hand to manipulate them. What we are speaking of here are all the myriad artificial creations and phantasms which we have neither hands to touch nor eyes to perceive but which we employ when we resort to words.

Parting Arguments

Years ago, as a graduate student no longer involved in phenomenology but still under its influence, I was taking a course in linguistics when my professor, in that most typical of academic conventions, insisted that I define a term. Cornered, I replied that I prefer not to define, but would rather do as I was taught in phenomenology and describe. At this point she, in a reply which I feel pretty much sums up prevailing academic prejudices, sharply said, “Defining is describing!” With all due respect, definition is not description – but rather something uncomfortably close to fabrication. It is a speaking into existence that academics resort to when their *eyes* fail them. Description is truly descriptive only in that part of it which is *not* of language. Words hold no special power, but are inadequate, no matter how they are put to use. What precision they possess is found in their

adherence to the things which they represent. Misunderstandings rarely arise from a failure to clarify terms, and it takes little in the way of verbal clues for us to locate meaning when that which the words indicate has been properly understood. Conversely, no amount of verbalization makes clear to others that which is outside their experience and which they have no eyes to see! Standardized vocabulary, no doubt, brings scholars together and makes communication less of a chore, but it is a convenience that represents their greatest danger. It is precisely this taking refuge in terminology and community in words that draws us away from “the things themselves”.

To this day, the logic of the *logos* is equated with rationality, as if the conceptualizations of language can be employed in the same way and with the kind of precision reached in mathematics. Many of the

time honoured practices of academia – categorization, syllogisms, even dialectics – are, to greater or lesser degrees, irrelevant exercises in speechifying. However, it is not when we offer things up in words, but when we take things in hand and put them to use, that we know them best. If not in philosophy, then in science, at least, it should have been realized long ago that nature does not respond to a reasoned argument, or recognize a logical middle term. For science, such paroxysms of erudition may be a harmless conceit to indulge before getting back to its real work. But for knowledge which is not of science, that is to say of things which cannot be taken in hand, these pretensions are fatal. In our devotion to the daytime and what we take to be the clarity of words, we plunge “the things themselves” into darkness! If we are to approach phenomena with the sightedness that is our goal, we must somehow arrive at an awareness that transcends the limitations of language.

About the Author



Christopher Pulte received a BA in Phenomenological Psychology from the University of Dallas, and a Master’s degree from the University of Texas in Austin. He has since been engaged as a lecturer at Yokohama Soei College in Yokohama, Japan. A lifelong Nietzsche enthusiast, his interests furthermore run both to languages and to a wide range of writers, from Alexis Tocqueville to Ortega Y Gasset.

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