

## Philosophy and Lived Experience: A Phenomenological Revival?

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Introducing a collection of essays and responses as varied as the ones gathered in this volume is not an easy task. The quality of the work is high — each essay survived blind review by three colleagues — but the philosophical approaches taken, educational concerns addressed, and bodies of literature drawn from are wide-ranging. So, rather than trying to write a comprehensive introduction, one that would include a mention of each essay and response, I will focus on two themes that emerged for me as I re-read the works.

The first theme is unsurprising, as it was designed prior to the conference and announced in the call for papers: *the arts*. In the call, the theme was described as “Education, the Arts, and Social Change” and its purpose was to solicit contributions that would address arts policy initiatives. Examples provided in the call for papers included: the role of aesthetic education in social change today, either generally or in relation to particular works of art; the intrinsic versus instrumental value of the arts in education; the role of artists and writers as social critics, and/or the concern that this role is limited today because artistic works are absorbed by systems of economic exchange; and, controversies about the use of literary and other artistic works in schools. The essays that address this theme most directly are Tal Gilead’s fine critique of “investment” discourse in art education, employing the very economic concepts used by proponents of investment discourse, and Leann Logsdon and Deron Boyles’ argument that the problem lies less in instrumental uses of the arts per se, and more in narrowly utilitarian instrumentalism, instead of which they propose a pragmatic instrumentalism for the arts in education.

Many other essay and responses take up the theme of the arts in other ways, less directly related to policy issues but no less relevant to education today. Sam Rocha’s account of jazz improvisation as an instance of studying, Darryl de Marzio’s exploration of modernist art as an embodiment of an ethics of teaching, Ann Chinnery’s concerns about the move away from museums of objects and toward museums of ideas, and Cara Furman’s argument that both reading and writing fiction offer opportunities to experiment with ideas and ways of living, are four examples of the attention given to the performing, visual, and literary arts and their significance in education.

The second theme is one that emerged from the Philosophy of Education Society conference itself, held in March 2012. Though I had read each submission in the Fall 2011, it was not until the annual meeting actually took place in Pittsburgh — until I attended the sessions and listened to the presentations — that it struck me how many contributors this year highlighted lived experience in the rich subjective detail of human consciousness. While I could blame this initial oversight on my lack

of attentiveness while reading the submissions and designing the program, it is perhaps a sign also of the lived experience of “con-ferring,” of bringing together colleagues and their work in a shared place and time.

Many of the essays and responses share what I might call a phenomenological sensibility. That is to say, while they do not attempt to conduct a phenomenological reduction in the technical sense, their work is rooted in an attentiveness to lived experience, with all its thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. A prime example is George Yancy’s account of the racism experienced in everyday encounters by a black man walking past a car with a white driver or sharing an elevator with a white woman. His essay illustrates powerfully how, in spite of “work that argues that race is semantically empty, ontologically bankrupt, and scientifically meaningless,” the lived experience of a white body withdrawing behind the safety of a locked car door and of the visceral response within the black body that has just been cast as potential threat is far from empty, bankrupt, and meaningless.

Having read and used, and intending to continue to read and use, the work of Jacques Derrida, I have been skeptical of phenomenology, and especially of its Promised Land of consciousness stripped of its discursive encumbrances. But there seem to be new possibilities for what James Mensch has called “postfoundational phenomenology,” a philosophical approach that recognizes the persistent human desire to understand human experience at the level of experience, without succumbing to the foundationalist “tendency to seek a ground of experience ... beyond all experience.”<sup>1</sup> The accounts of the lived experience of studying guitar (Rocha), of being the object of racism (Yancy), of being spooked by the dark (Megan Laverty), of seeing zombies in one’s classroom (P.J. Nelsen) — these accounts given by various authors in this volume do not seek to ground the presence of the living subjects or their consciousness, nor do they deny the role of absence in that presence. They do, however, evoke a rich world in which the philosophical questions raised come to life.

In discerning a phenomenological sensibility in many contributions to this volume, then, I take phenomenology in the quite basic sense of “a reflective, descriptive relation of what presents itself to consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, those who believe that philosophy minimally requires an argument may not be satisfied with the reflective description of what presents itself to consciousness. I certainly would not argue that philosophy of education should do away with argument, but it seems to me that several essays in this volume demonstrate what can be gained when reflective description of lived experience is incorporated into, or used as the point of departure for, a philosophical inquiry or argument. As respondent Barbara Applebaum writes about the value of Yancy’s approach: “Clearly, Yancy does philosophy from a place of lived embodied experience not for better descriptive purposes but *in order to expose* the discursive practices that perpetuate racial injustice and that can be erased by abstract theoretical analysis.” The possibilities for philosophical scrutiny lie in the required *reflection* on what presents itself to consciousness. For example, Kneller Lecturer John Caputo does not just describe the experience of the event “like a ghost whispering in our ear, making promises, like

the visitation by some spirit that pretends to know the future,” he uses this evocation of the uneasy mixture of curiosity and anxiety that accompanies the event in teaching to argue against the school as a place of preparation for a planned and plannable future, and for the school as “a place of uncanny and unnerving instability, preserving a space of openness, a readiness for the future, pushing forward into an unknown future.” In response, Laverty does not just describe the memory of “childhood fears ... when we would ask to sleep with the light on and implore our parents to check cupboards for monsters,” she uses this description to reflect on the condition of safety that undergirds children’s preoccupation with “spooks, spooking, and being spooked.”

When authors carefully render the rich subjective detail of human consciousness, this often gives their work a literary, sometimes even poetic quality. While this may make their work suspect to readers who seek in philosophy the kind of impersonal precision and certainty that would make it more akin to science than to literature, I agree with Arthur Danto that “the concept of philosophical truth and the form of philosophical expression are internally enough related that we may want to recognize that when we turn to other forms we may also be turning to other conceptions of philosophical truth.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, philosophy that uses a literary form of expression may seek to convey a different kind of truth than philosophy that uses a more linear, abstract, and detached form. Certainly, not all literature is philosophical, nor is all philosophy literary, but philosophical and literary qualities are not mutually exclusive. Danto therefore argues that, while philosophy is not only literature, philosophers would do well to take seriously the literary side of philosophy. Both philosophy and literature aim for a particular kind of universality in their engagement with readers: philosophy “is literature when, for each reader I, I is the subject of the story.” In other words, and in response to the saying that literature is a kind of mirror, philosophy with a literary quality “is a mirror less in passively returning an image than in transforming the self-consciousness of the reader who in virtue of identifying with the image recognizes what he is.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul Standish, in his response to Charles Bingham, Antew Dejene, Alma Krilic, and Emily Sadowski’s argument that “the taught book cannot speak” and therefore books should not be taught, does not simply state his disagreement and explain why he believes books are not self-contained or “sufficient unto themselves.” Instead, he eloquently enacts the kind of interpretive help that Bingham et al. claim is detrimental to a book’s ability to speak, so that the reader can judge for her or himself whether *Ulysses* is tethered or untethered as a result.

Standish’s description of the way he learned to teach literature, Yancy’s vivid portrayal of the chilling effect of the “*Click, Click*” of car doors locking, or Rocha’s detailed account of studying guitar are true, in the correspondence sense that they refer to real experiences lived by real people. But my point is that it is not their factuality that makes them so effective; rather, it is that they are splendidly well-written, and through this quality transform the reader’s self-consciousness and engage her or him affectively, eliciting both the concentration and motivation to think about the philosophical questions posed. Each reader “I” will be able to see

her- or himself as the subject of the story, in what need not be a pleasant recognition. The reader may see himself as the black man walking down the street, or may recognize herself as the white driver locking the car doors; the reader may see herself as the musician who is fully present in play, or may recognize himself as the amateur who tried to imitate studied patterns; the reader may see himself as the student who was subjected to explicative teaching, or may recognize herself as the teacher who tried to remain silent and failed. It is difficult to resist reflection when what presents itself to consciousness presents itself so vividly, in such rich detail and poignant description.

That I discerned a phenomenological trend and chose to draw attention to it is of course not meant to overlook the diversity of the concerns and approaches in this volume. The essays and responses address topics ranging from Kantian moral theory to the role of impotentiality in study, and from outcome assessments to what we learn from the animals we eat. Philosophers of education continue to investigate enduring and newly emerging educational issues, and they do so using a wide variety of investigative tools and forms of expression. Accordingly, this collection has as much to appreciate for those who do not share an interest in philosophy of the arts and lived experience, as it does for those who do. I invite you to take the time to explore its many facets.

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1. James R. Mensch, *Postfoundational Phenomenology: Husserlian Reflections on Presence and Embodiment* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 16.

3. Arthur C. Danto, "Philosophy as/and/of Literature," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 1 (1984): 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 17.

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