

COMMENTS ON PHILOSOPHY

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The greatest mystery is that I am conscious, have a meaningful world and can be aware that I am aware. I have a felt sense of agency, that I can do things, have an effect, am capable but also that the world is a place that resists my willing. Objects and other people have a recalcitrance that must be “navigated,” or “negotiated” to fulfill my desires and meet my needs. I develop interpretive habits and emotional-cognitive-behavioral strategies in negotiating “the world.”

Human meaningful awareness is a felt sense of impetus, desire, presence, importance, equilibrium or disequilibrium. Meaningful awareness is the “place” where “the world” reveals itself. Everything we think, say or do is in the context of a sense of things, a meaningful world. Every meaningful world is always already underway and any new perspective arises out of an individual perspective within a collective legacy we call family, society, culture, civilization.

The “I” emerges via entry into language and meaning in a social context. Without language, there is no “I.” The capacity for language and meaning is given in nature. But language and self must be cultivated, learned via sensation and association with others. It is this context that abstract expectations, value judgments, and all aspects of personhood and interpersonal relations arise, most centrally, our capacity for ethical sensitivity and responsibility, for empathy and reciprocity. The remarkable example of Helen Keller who was both blind and deaf from infancy bears this out. (*The World I Live In*, 1908.) Language is not another object of awareness and thought that one can hold at a distance and observe. Language cannot be reduced to a description of its surface features or to theoretical explanations\ in semiotics- Language is the primordial condition for the possibility of conscious meaningful awareness. It is the development of self-awareness through language and concept use that opens meaningfulness.

Human life is a spiritual not merely a practical or biological journey. “Spiritual” refers to our capacity within a meaningful world to be affected, for things to matter deeply, our capacity for wonder, horror, anguish, awe and our inherent impetus to grow and develop, to struggle with and within the limits of our meaning toward freedom. Freedom is the movement toward our individual and collective possibilities. Philosophy is the highest expression of this self-overcoming, this movement toward our possibilities because it questions the very boundaries of the known, of intelligibility itself that can move us to radically new perspectives. The very name philosophy, love of wisdom, implies that sentiment precedes reason. We only think because we are motivated to do so within a context of meaningful lived-felt-experience.

Philosophy is a confrontation with the mystery of being, that there is anything at all, which is the mystery of intelligibility. That there is an intelligible world is the mystery that presents itself at every moment. This mystery is always there, only we do not notice it in the flow of the ordinary. We only see it when meaning is new, ruptures the ordinary. When the ordinary becomes strange and wondrous, philosophy can begin and can engender a transformation in attitude. The known presents a puzzle, a challenge; perhaps a crisis; it immediately opens us to the question of why things are as they are or appear to be or why they ought to be one way rather than another. Philosophy as radical inquiry is the ultimate risk of our meaning and a confrontation with our deep vulnerability and fallibility. To truly be a philosopher is to be prepared to move beyond any view you hold toward further insight and be as aware as possible of your presuppositions and prejudices, the limits of your meaningfulness.

In contemporary Western philosophy there are several **general styles or approaches to philosophy** that have emerged and dominated over the past two centuries in post Kantian philosophy. One style or approach is called *analytic philosophy*, which emerged from Frege, Russell,-Carnap,

Wittgenstein, to Austin, Ryle, Quine, Davidson, etc.. *Analytic philosophy* is primarily concerned with conceptual clarity, logical analysis and takes literal discourse as fundamental

Another approach is in the lineage of Hegel, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Brentano, Husserl, to Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, etc., and is called *hermeneutic phenomenology* (sometimes referred to with the misnomer: Continental philosophy). *Hermeneutic phenomenology* attempts to achieve clarity of a different sort, clarity by attention to what is given in experience and gained by careful attention to intuition, what can be directly concretely experienced. Poetical and metaphorical discourse is seen as primordial. Conceptual abstractions in literal discourse used in argumentation, deduction and theoretical explanation are seen as derivative or secondary forms of understanding. "*Hermeneutic*" refers to the recognition that all meaningful experience is fundamentally interpretive. There is no truth or reality apart from this fundamental interpretive condition.

American Pragmatism (Emerson, James, Pierce, Dewey) is a third approach to philosophy that arose in the 19th and 20th centuries that has influenced both analytic and hermeneutic phenomenology. Pragmatism takes the meaning and truth of any idea as a function of its practical consequence. Language is a tool for problem solving, prediction, and action rather than correspondence to reality. Like hermeneutical phenomenology, Pragmatism sees poetic language as the source of meaning.

Both Analytic philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology focus on meaning and language, in other words, both have made the "linguistic turn." But they often are in conflict over a basic difference in how they see the goal and role of philosophy based on a fundamental difference about the nature of language. The question is whether and to what extent language can be exact and refer to reality in some literal way. For analytic philosophers, literal discourse that is essential to the sciences and other areas of human discourse is seen as fundamental to an articulation of truth. Poetic and metaphorical use of language is parasitic on literal discourse and is seen as primarily emotive and having little or nothing to do with truth even if highly important for human expression of feeling.- In contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology sees language as essentially and inescapably symbolic and metaphorical. Literal discourse is parasitic on symbolic discourse. For hermeneutic phenomenology, poetic metaphorical language is not one of many uses of language, but reflects the primary way in which meaningfulness can arise. Such primordial language gives rise to all forms of articulation. The inexactitude of poetic language is the originary entry into meaning.

Analytic philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology really do two different things from two different starting points and are not only compatible but complementary. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a highly skilled recognition of what is originary to all thought. It attempts to provide an understanding of understanding itself as it emerges from the conditions of possibility of meaningful lived experience. Analytic philosophy is done within an already established domain of literal discourse. Though analytic philosophy is immensely valuable in advancing discursive argumentation about concepts and providing theoretical understanding of core concepts such as truth, knowledge, reality, justice, time, meaning, etc., it is usually presumed that literal discourse, if well-constructed and accurate, corresponds to reality in itself. But since this domain of discourse arises out of and is made possible only in the prior context of originary consciousness, the very notion of "reality-in-itself" is derivative and does not refer to something fundamental in itself prior to language. "The world" is always meaningful. Any object is always for and in concrete consciousness. No conceptual argumentative abstraction escapes this primordial condition.

Hermeneutic phenomenology descriptively examines originary primordial conditions of possibility of meaningful experience and understanding prior to literal discourse and conceptual structuring. Though hermeneutic phenomenology includes auxiliary use literal discourse and argumentation, it is primarily concerned with description of concrete lived experience that comes to us

in “intuition” rather than clarification of concepts and inferences generated in argumentation. It is an approach to awareness that moves more deeply into that awareness rather than away from it in conceptual, theoretical abstractions about it. As American Pragmatism would also have it, language does not correspond to something beyond language and experience. The meaning and truth of any idea is a function of its practical consequence. Language is a tool for problem solving, prediction, and action rather than correspondence to reality.

Hermeneutic phenomenology aims at transformative insight, insight that allows us to see differently, be in ways we could not imagine until we have had such an epiphany. It engenders a gestalt shift in understanding as opposed to a discursive argumentative movement step by step to some conclusion or theoretical explanation. It subordinates theoretical explanation, hitherto seen in twenty-six centuries of Western philosophy and science as the most fundamental or the only form of understanding, to hermeneutic phenomenology as most fundamental in understanding the conditions of possibility for any understanding. It’s starting point is not a theoretical attempt to explain anything but rather an exceedingly rigorous and careful observation of the basic features of experience in which meaning arises. It does not pretend to do this without presuppositions but rather sees those limits as themselves indications of the most fundamental features of experience. It does not replace or try to compete with theoretical understanding, rather it provides a more fundamental basis for and context in which to grasp theoretical explanation as a specie of interpretation and understanding.

Philosophy, religions and the sciences are primary ways of interpreting and understanding that arise in the course of already established ways of life, already established domains of meaningfulness. When operating within their own boundaries they are not competitors. They do different things using different kinds of discourse for different purposes. In overall human understanding they can complement each other insofar as they remain true to their respective purposes, limits, and types of discourse. The discourse proper to science is *literal discourse* that aims at conceptual clarity and uses mathematization of phenomena to test cause and effect relationships and provide coherent theoretical explanatory frameworks for further inquiry and testing.

Religions use *mythopoetical discourse*, language of the heart, to express and preserve founding transformational and salvational experiences of founders such as Buddha, Jesus, Muhammed. These experiences are preserved in ritual and myth. Unlike ritual reenactment of or mythological accounts of the most sacred events, the use of literal discourse to rationally clarify and justify the beliefs or truths of a religion gives rise to doctrine. The development and insistence on literal truth in doctrine too easily leads to “idolatry of doctrine” rather than remaining true to the transformational experience that is the core of religions and is best preserved in language of the heart, not literal discourse (see “The Idolatry of Doctrine” www.deanpickard.com).

Similarly, a scientist who goes beyond the methods and limits of science and proclaims an overall privileged place for science is *scientistic*. It is in scientism and religious literalized doctrine that we find the conflict between science and religion that simply arises due to arrogance and a profound lack of understanding of our finitude and the basic difference of function between literal and symbolic or poetical discourse. Religion and science cannot replace each other. They meet very different human needs. The logic of A or not A, cannot be used to adjudicate any supposed contradictions between metaphysical religions such as Christianity and Islam or any supposed conflicts between science and religion. Thus, evolutionary theory versus creationism (an invention that is damaging to theistic religion and misses the point) is a non-debate that is only possible based on the mistaken attempt to literalize religion (Augustine and his teacher Ambrose warned against this as one of the worst forms of blasphemy, that is, to literalize and logicize the sacred). Non theistic religions such as Buddhism and Daoism tend to avoid these “logical” problems of origin, creation and doctrine. Buddhism, for example,

aims to expose the immediate conditions and causes of suffering via an immediate phenomenology of consciousness as a basis for overcoming suffering. So it does not engage in metaphysical speculation as theistic religions do and avoids these kinds of logical problems.

Philosophy and science are similar in that both use literal discourse and critical thinking in testing procedures. But whereas the sciences employ empirical methods of experimental design to mathematize phenomena and test cause and effect relationships, analytic philosophy uses rigorous tests for greater clarity and logical consistency about, for example, the nature of justice. Since justice is not a spatiotemporal phenomenon (has no shape, size, location, color, etc), it cannot be measured and tested in the sciences. Like science, philosophy uses literal discourse for propositional and rational clarity but often effectively uses metaphorical or poetical discourse, literature and fiction, as well, to achieve a deeper narrative and intuitive understanding. In that regard, philosophy is akin to art in its capacity to bring us to see things differently, open new worlds.

Religion and philosophy can cross boundaries insofar as they engender emancipatory transformative experience. What separates them is religion is not a testing procedure. Its primary “test” is the transformation of the individual to a new way of being in the world where selfishness and fear are replaced by profound equilibrium and empathy. Both religion and some forms of philosophy can engender such a transformation.

Philosophy, in contrast to both science and religion, is radical inquiry that is a kind of undoing, that allows us to see through what we thought we knew, what we take for granted, overturn our truths and provide a kind of fresh start. Radical inquiry seeks to overturn assumptions and habits of thought in the service of greater understanding and insight. For a philosopher or lover of wisdom, this overturning is not merely a shift of understanding or transformation within a world of meaning and is not turning from one world of meaningfulness to another, as in a religious conversion, a scientific paradigm shift, or the experience of falling in love. To be a lover of wisdom, to inquire radically, is to be caught up in this turning itself. It is to be in a perpetual state of self-questioning and self-overcoming in order to have insight, to “see into” things in a way that can transform the perspective and attitude of the thinker. It is commitment, come what may, to radical inquiry and this turning itself that distinguishes the love of wisdom.

The domain of philosophy is primarily concerned with issues science and religion as such cannot address, issues such as the boundaries of concepts such as time, the nature of meaning, and reflection on the nature, limits and identities of many things, including science and religion. To the extent a scientist or religious person pursues such issues free of religious dogma or scientism, they are entering into the domain of philosophy.

In Western philosophy there are two interrelated traditions that stem from Pre-Socratic philosophy and from Socrates: One is philosophy as a kind of “theoretical enterprise” where we seek understanding for its own sake. Analytic philosophy is in this tradition. The other tradition is philosophy as a “spiritual practice” where the insights that result from the highly rigorous inquiry are brought to bear on our daily activities and our overall attitude toward things. Hermeneutical phenomenology is more in that tradition. For Socrates, philosophy aimed primarily at virtue, care of the self, the rational capacity to choose more wisely because things matter. In that form, philosophy is a process of radical inquiry that is not merely intellectual but inquiry driven by matters of the heart, a desire to understand and improve one’s self that can transform who one is. It is a kind of undoing in which we risk ourselves, our meaningfulness in the service of self-understanding and personal transformation.

The goal of living a better human life is reflected in Socrates famous remark “the unexamined life is not worth living.” This is essentially the same goal of the Buddha about living a wakeful life. Socrates’ method was a careful critical examination of our actions and beliefs to promote a more

virtuous life. The Buddha used careful noticing of immediate awareness to reveal the basic features of experience to free us from habits of mind that lead to suffering and unethical action—There is a collection of purported teachings of Jesus called “The Gospel of Thomas” that was not included in the canonical Gospels because it does not mention the central tenants of what became Christian dogma: crucifixion, resurrection, divinity of Jesus, the immanent end of the world and second coming, and salvation. The Gospel of Thomas is a book of wisdom about the human condition and the possible emancipation open to all people. Like the inquiry of Socrates and the mindfulness practice of the Buddha, the book engenders “wakefulness,” not dogma.

The spiritual approach to philosophy always involves critical thinking aimed at better human life, but it must translate into lived experience, a practice, not merely intellectual understanding. Many great teachers and thinkers, for example, Bodhidharma (5th-6th century ACE) who brought Chan Buddhism to China from India, have emphasized that the movement toward spiritual freedom requires both critical thought and spiritual practice. The first opens the way by allowing us to critique and empty out what we think we know and avoid the excesses of mere practice. We must not get caught in our interpretations of what we experience in our practices (See “Mystical Experience and Ontological Claims,” 1982, www.deanpickard.com). Skillful critical thought allows us to avoid the pitfall of becoming attached to any beliefs that might arise from spiritual practices. But equally, critical thought without spiritual practice such as Vipassana (thought to be the oldest form of Buddhist meditation), provides merely intellectual clarity at best, not a transformation in how we live and experience. Critical thought is a necessary condition, a necessary preparation, but not a sufficient condition for wakeful living. Likewise, mere meditation or other spiritual practices (ritual, good deeds, prayer, etc) without clear rational thinking also cannot sufficiently guide us. Skillful thinking must guide us to the path but it is not enough. It must also reflexively undermine itself with skillful thinking in order to open a path to direct experience as many thinkers such as Gautama Buddha, Zhuangzi, Parmenides, Plato, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Nietzsche, and many others have indicated. There is ample evidence that every great teacher was a critical thinker well aware of the best thought, insight and practice in his or her tradition that was then used to move to a direct awareness, to an immediate felt-lived *wisdom* in practice. Practice is NOT wisdom. Critical thought is NOT wisdom. Practice and critical thought together can open us to wisdom or seeing which is an attitude and a way of being, not belief.

Regardless of our various beliefs, commitments and ways of understanding, at the core of being human is yearning and vulnerability in a condition of uncertainty. We are finite, fallible, pain/pleasure beings susceptible to attachment and aversion and thus to loss and harm. Things matter to us from a situated standpoint of a meaningful world. Without this core condition of vulnerability, ethics would not be an issue, nor would our curiosity and wonder. All human striving to understand arises from this core. The fundamental task in the flux of self and world beyond mere survival, security, and comfort is understanding but always from some limited perspective. What can arise from an ability to see the consequence of finitude and uncertainty clearly is not any final truth or explanation, but the process of insight that can give rise to an emancipated attitude about life. The reflexive and ironic position we are in is that we must use the very limits of our meaningfulness to finally become aware of these limits as enabling horizons but also inescapable conditions of finitude. We can have a perspective on what it is to be perspectival, finite, fallible beings who are fundamentally interpretive and live in our meanings. Insofar as philosophy disabuses us of misleading or false habitual perspectives, overcomes our thoughtless interpretive reflexes and provides fresh more viable insightful perspectives, it serves us in a way no other activity can. Philosophy serves to keep us intellectually and spiritual vital, creative, responsible in our perspectives and reminds us of our finitude and fallibility. This keeps us humble and serves as a check and balance against religious dogmatism, political ideology, and scientism. It is

consistent with and supportive of the flourishing of genuine science, genuine religion and essential practical life. Philosophy is essentially the wisdom of insecurity that frees us from our desperate desire for permanence, truth, being right and salvation from finitude. That freedom in turn allows us to genuinely live a life of compassion exemplified in such great teachers as Kongzi, Zhuangzi, Buddha, Socrates, Jesus and others whose lives we can emulate if we do not merely believe and follow what they taught, but discover it in our own experience. It is less what they said than who they were and how they lived that is a model for us, their courage, insightfulness, integrity and deep sense of the sacred, a sense of wonder and awe.