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Meaning, Being and Expression: A Phenomenological Justification for Interdisciplinary Scholarship

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Meaning, Being and Expression: A Phenomenological Justification for Interdisciplinary Scholarship

Abstract

The purpose of this talk is two-fold: first, to lay out a phenomenological justification for why scientific or theoretical investigation must be carried out both within particular disciplines and across various disciplines; and second, to show that such a justification—alluded to with varying levels of explicitness in various works by various figures—itself opens new paths of exploration for phenomenology.

Keywords

phenomenology, Herman Dooyeweerd, interdisciplinary research, meaning, creation

Disciplines

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Comments

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Meaning, Being and Expression:

A Phenomenological Justification for Inter-Disciplinary Scholarship

The purpose of this talk is two-fold: first, to lay out a phenomenological justification for why rigorous scientific or theoretical investigation must be carried out both within particular disciplines and across various disciplines; and second, to show that such a justification—alluded to with varying levels of explicitness in various works and by various figures—itsself opens new paths of exploration for phenomenology.

The impetus of this two-fold task is contained, in kernel, in an infamous statement from the Dutch phenomenologist Herman Dooyeweerd. In the prolegomena to his magnum opus, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Dooyeweerd states that “Meaning is the being of all that has been created and the nature even of our selfhood.”¹ This statement has long proved enigmatic to Dooyeweerd scholars, and the key to unpacking it may lie in the subtitle under which this statement is made: “Meaning as the mode of being of all that is created” (NC I, 4). In a translator’s note, we read that the Dutch here (“De zin is het zijn van alle creatuurlijk zijnde”) is based on a translation of Heidegger’s “das Sein des Seienden”. As such, the subtitle could also read: “Meaning as the Being of all creaturely beings.”

Phrased this way, we see that Dooyeweerd’s claim about meaning as the being of that which has been created, including human selfhood or subjectivity, is a response to Heidegger’s question of the meaning of Being. Not only does Dooyeweerd take up the *Seinsfrage*, then, but he offers a straightforward (if perhaps complex) answer: “The meaning of Being is Being as meaning.” Exploring the phenomenological context of this statement opens up the philosophical,

¹ Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, Volume 1 (trans. David H. Freeman and William S. Young; Philadelphia: The Reformed and Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1953), 4. Hereafter cited as NC, followed by Volume number (I), and page number (4).

religious and scientific sense at the heart of Dooyeweerd's claim. This, in turn, provides the underpinning for a particular conception of the relationship between the various disciplines that itself is rooted in a particular account of the world as a web of relationships. At its root, Dooyeweerd's claim not only provides the ultimate justification of inter-disciplinary scholarship (in scientific or theoretical investigation) as being rooted in the full complexity of the life-world (in the natural attitude), but it also shows the common root of two themes that have been on the periphery of phenomenological investigation for much of the 20th century. These themes—meaning and being—spring from the common root of expression, a concept that we must perhaps revisit if we are to more fully grasp the significance of the phenomenological enterprise.

Creation

To begin to explore this problem, we must first attend to the scope of Dooyeweerd's claim: what is being qualified by the adjective "creaturely" in the phrase "Meaning as the being of all creaturely beings"? In Dooyeweerd's language, creature is applied to everything that is not the Creator, that is, everything that is not God. As such, "creaturely beings" encompass all beings directly encountered in experience and in the life-world, including what we would normally characterize as 'living entities,' 'natural objects,' and 'cultural artifacts.' "Creaturely beings," therefore, includes animals, rocks, trees, humans—but also schools, banks, and businesses.

But the 'what' question is only part of Dooyeweerd's account of 'creaturely existence', and not the most significant. While there are certainly things (including institutions) in creation, Dooyeweerd, in true phenomenological fashion, is more concerned with the various ways that creatures relate to each other. He calls these the 'modal aspects' of creation. These modal aspects pertain not only to conscious creatures, but to all creatures: even animals relate to each other

biologically or chemically, and even rocks relate to each other physically. As such, the modal aspects are not intentional acts, but are rather pseudo-intentionalities² infused in the very nature of creation itself. This ontologizing of intentionality is, in many ways, the key feature of Dooyeweerd's phenomenology, and it establishes the heart of his claim that "Meaning is the Being of creaturely beings."

Meaning and Expression

Dooyeweerd is adamant that meaning is the very being of creaturely existence itself; that is, creatures *are* meaning, they do not merely *have* meaning.³ In Husserlian terms, we could clarify this by saying that creaturely being is inherently expressive—it contains within itself, not merely an indicative reference to something else, but an inherent meaning that saturates its very being.⁴ But later phenomenology has complicated the simple distinction between indication and expression⁵ and Dooyeweerd's usage seems to foreshadow this later complication. For Dooyeweerd, the meaningfulness of creation is not divorced from its empirical expression, but is precisely tied to it—its empirical expression is, precisely, its meaningfulness, and vice versa. Its being and its meaning cannot be separated—a creature is what it means and it means what it is.

² Given more time, we would have to unpack this enigmatic phrase (pseudo-intentionalities), as well as the ontologization of intentionality we will discover in the next sentence. Given the close connection between intentionality and acts of consciousness, calling the modal aspects "intentionalities" would either require Dooyeweerd to claim that God is the ultimate consciousness—the transcendent transcendental subject—and the modal aspects God's way of intending creation, or that the aspects are merely the result of human intentional relations. Dooyeweerd would reject both of these possibilities (though he'd probably come closer to the former than the latter), while affirming parts of each; hence, the phrase 'pseudo-intentionalities'. Hopefully there will be time to discuss this more in the question period following this paper.

³ Unpacking precisely what this means for him is something that has vexed scholars for decades; here, I can offer only a suggested interpretation, focusing on its application rather than justifying it as an accurate reading of Dooyeweerd.

⁴ I am referring here primarily to Husserl's explanation of indication and expression in the first of the *Logical Investigations* (translated by J.N. Findlay; New York and London: Routledge, 2001); see especially §§ 1-16 of the First Investigation.

⁵ Nowhere more famously than in Derrida's *Voice and Phenomenon*.

To make sense of this, we must posit a certain meaningfulness to the entirety of creaturely being. The modal aspects—as ontologized pseudo-intentionalities—move us toward this ‘big-picture’ meaning from within the scope of that meaning; in the modal aspects, we see an immanent, factual way to access transcendental meaning. As such, they are phenomenological to their core.

This phenomenological nature is rooted in the relationality that defines the aspects. The aspects are possible ways creatures have of relating to other creatures. These possible relationships are not secondary or accidental, but are built into the very nature of creation itself. Creation is constituted by a consistent warp and woof, a pattern of weaving, an order that is stable though not static (given its historical unfolding, the influence of temporality, etc.). Every creature—be it biological or institutional—takes its place within this creational weave.⁶ As such, every creature—from an atom to a university—participates, as either subject or object, in each and every modal aspect in different ways.

Human beings are unique among creatures insofar as we, and we alone, are able to function as subjects in the higher-order modal aspects.⁷ One implication of this is that, while all creatures can be experienced, only humans are capable of experiencing—only humans can be phenomenological *subjects*. And a fundamental characteristic of experience, according to Dooyeweerd, is that it is fundamentally integral—in experience, we inevitably integrate the diversity of modal aspects into a single, unified experience of the world. While we can separate this unified experience into its various aspects and elements via theoretical thought and its objectifying [*Gegenstandlich*] power, in everyday “naïve” experience, we pull all the various

⁶Dooyeweerd calls these “individuality structures”; see, e.g., NC II, 11, 419; III, 78-174.

⁷ While rocks or trees, for example, can be the objects of economic exchange, only humans can function as economic subjects.

aspects together into an experience of unified wholes (including the ultimate unified whole of the world).⁸

Human experience, therefore, is fundamentally an experience of unity amidst diversity. Theoretical or scientific thought, on the other hand, is the experience of diversification, of separating out or making distinctions between that which I naively experience as unified.

The implications of this are two-fold for our purposes today: 1) each creature can be looked at from the perspective of any one of the modal aspects, as well as from the perspective of how those modal aspects come together; and 2) the totality of creation—its weave (or transcendental structure) but also its empirical, factual embodiment in particular creatures—taken together expresses something of God. The first of these provides an ontological and phenomenological justification for inter-disciplinary scholarship rooted in the necessary complexity of the life-world as experienced in the natural attitude; the second entails that this unity-complexity relation is not only meaningful, but is primarily constituted by meaning—it *is* because it *means*, because it *expresses*.

Inter-disciplinarity and the need for (phenomenological) Philosophy

The latter claim is important, not only to root Dooyeweerd firmly in the phenomenological camp via his relation to Heidegger, but also to show the phenomenological necessity of interdisciplinarity: to get at the ‘thing itself’ [die Sache Selbst], we must explore its relationship to the whole of creation, a relationship that must be simultaneously pursued (because it is simultaneously lived) in each of the diverse aspects, as well as in the relations between them. The necessity of interdisciplinarity is fundamentally rooted in the expressive character of

⁸ Cf. NC I, 34 ff.

creation,⁹ and the ‘thing itself’ is a matter [*Sache*] only insofar as it is in a meaningful relation with other things, mutually expressive of yet something else (that is not itself directly a matter [*Sache*] for investigation).

The ability of a creature to become the object of theoretical or scientific inquiry is rooted in its inclusion in naïve experience, which itself is rooted both in the object’s multi-aspectual existence and the subject’s unifying ability. As such, the theoretico-scientific enterprise is rooted, in its very foundation, in the fact that the object can be approached from various theoretical angles or aspects, each of which is equally true of the object: because the object relates to the rest of creation physically, chemically, biologically, economically, and more, there are insights into its true nature to be gleaned from physics, chemistry, biology, economics—and more. None of these offers the definitive account of what the thing is, but each of them offers a true account. And because each offers a true account, grasping the thing fully requires the exploration and integration of the truth of all these accounts.

The exploration of these various accounts is the task of the various sciences, each devoted to looking at creaturely reality through the lens of a particular aspect. As such, genuine insight into any matter [*Sache*] whatsoever can be gained by looking at that matter through the lens of mathematics, geometry, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology (human and animal), logic, history, linguistics, sociology, economics, art/aesthetics, law, ethics, and theology.¹⁰ Each

⁹ To unpack this further, one would have to explore more deeply the concepts of meaning and expression as they function in the phenomenological tradition. The touchstones of such an exploration can be found in Derrida’s *Voice and Phenomenon* and Deleuze’s *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* and *The Logic of Sense*.

¹⁰ The aspects are: quantitative, spatial, kinematic, physical, biotic, sensitive/psychical, analytical, historical/formative, lingual, social, economic, aesthetic, juridical, ethical and pistic/faith.

of these disciplines will provide us with truths about any and every matter to be explored in the world.

However, once insight into the matter has been gained via these various disciplines, it remains to distill a true picture of the matter under investigation from these various adumbrations. Phenomenology, from its earliest days, has showed us that the process of distilling meaningful experience from these adumbrations is far from simple. For this reason, any attempt to thoroughly investigate a matter should require not only a multi-disciplinary approach, but an inter- or trans-disciplinary approach: it is not enough to look at the matter from a variety of disciplinary perspectives—we must also look at how those various perspectives are brought together into a unified experience of the thing itself. As such, any attempt at understanding a matter in a rigorous, scientific manner must necessarily include philosophy and, more specifically, phenomenology, as the discipline whose task is the elaboration of how we integrate the variety of our experiences into a coherent experience. All inter-disciplinary (as opposed to merely multi-disciplinary) work presupposes a phenomenology; genuinely rigorous inter-disciplinary science will explicate and examine that phenomenology explicitly.

The Elements of Inter-disciplinary Work

We have then established two necessary elements of truly scientific inter-disciplinary work: 1) disciplinary insights gained from those sciences tasked with looking at the world through the lens of a particular modal aspect; and 2) phenomenological inquiry into the unifying of those diverse perspectives into a coherent experiential whole.

But a third element is also necessary: one must examine, explicitly, the motivation and pragmatic outcome of the inter-disciplinary work. We never experience the world with a perfect

balance of the modal aspects. Rather, one aspect or another always takes the lead in any particular experience to help us navigate and negotiate the life-world. This ‘leading’ or ‘guiding’ aspect changes based on the context, and we evaluate the phenomenological relationship between the aspects differently based on the leading aspect: if I’m analyzing the Presidential nomination race, for example, I analyze the situation differently if I’m looking to understand how to be rhetorically persuasive in general than if I’m trying to predict who will win the nomination than if I’m trying to advocate for a particular political issue. In all three cases, I attend to the same matter (the Presidential nomination campaign), I look at that matter from a diversity of disciplinary perspectives (quantitative, qualitative, etc.), and I try to understand how those various perspectives are combined into a single experience (phenomenologically). What varies in the three examples is a second-order analysis of a certain phenomenological type: while the base phenomenological problem remains consistent across the disciplines (how does a subject create a unified experience?), a variation of that base problem is introduced in each of the examples: how does a subject communicate persuasively? How is a nomination campaign won? How does one best work for the implementation of X agenda item? These second order analyses introduce a distinct level of analysis to inter-disciplinary work: how do we employ the knowledge gained on the manner for a particular end?

This third element of inter-disciplinary work is itself an essential element. There can be no inter-disciplinary work without: a) insights from the multiple (modal) disciplines; b) insight into how to combine those first-order insights into a unified experience; and c) an account of the purpose for which this inter-disciplinary work is being carried out.

In contemporary research settings, we tend to answer the final question in one of two ways: we carry out our inter-disciplinary work, either for the sake of uncovering the Truth itself

(‘pure’ academics) or for the sake of economic profit (‘business’ research).¹¹ But this choice is too limited; there are a variety of other legitimate reasons to pursue inter-disciplinary work, and clarifying that motivation—or clarifying the outcome we hope to see from that work—is necessary for us to know how best to accomplish what we set out to do. We will need to think about the matter differently if we are examining it from the perspective of general communications than of political science than of social advocacy.

This final step, on the Dooyeweerdian model, is necessary as an attempt to fix a third level of meaning on the matter under investigation. Such a meaning is necessary because, ultimately, every matter for investigation is meaningful in and as what it is—but ‘what it is’ must be defined relationally, that is, in relation to other elements in creation. This is because the thing’s very existence cannot be separated from the meaning it has in the broader picture of creation, that is, of the world. This, I contend, is the ultimate meaning of Dooyeweerd’s claim that “Meaning is the being of all that has been created” (NC I, 4).

Conclusion

The implications of Dooyeweerd’s answer to Heidegger’s ‘question of being’ are manifold. Here, we have seen that one of its implications is that all investigations of creaturely things must be inter-disciplinary, if they are to yield us adequate insight into the thing in question. We have seen also that such work must needs have a phenomenological component, so as to understand how the manifold of disciplinary perspectives can be integrated into a holistic experience. Finally, we have seen that a third level of investigation is also necessary for inter-

¹¹ We may have other, empirical and personal motivations as well (advancing my career, spending time with friends, etc.), but these are not the main purpose for which the work itself is being done, even if they are the main reason why I personally am doing the work.

disciplinary work: the motivation that propels the work, and the outcome that motivation hopes to yield. Failing to attend to this final step leaves the work facing the ‘Crisis’ that Husserl acknowledged in the European sciences already in the 1930s: while the work might be factually correct, it will not be adequately integrated into naïve, lived experience, and so will fail to have or to make ‘sense.’

And so we begin to see the need for an analysis of the logic of sense itself (carried out by Deleuze in 1969), and so we start to open the entire problem of the relationship between meaning and being that has passed through the phenomenological tradition, largely unnoticed, under the rubric of ‘expression.’ This, perhaps, will be the scene of the next great phenomenological battle—and it will need to be undertaken in constant conversation with the other sciences as well as within the phenomenological tradition itself.