



Being on Earth – A Sketch of a Forthcoming Book

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This book was conceived as a phenomenological approach to knowledge, that is, a study of the world in terms of its immediate phenomena. Since the sciences, as they are presently constituted, are moving further and further away from sensible perception-chemistry, for example, may now be taught by computer without a laboratory component-our interest in phenomena brought us to the question: What is lost when knowing is separated from experience? In the academic classroom the answer to this question can sometimes appear to be “nothing,” but in actual practice, particularly in the field, researchers will often stress the need for a hands-on apprenticeship before the new member of the team can even read the field manual properly. Practice, as opposed to theory, still demands perceptual experience, but in stated theory there is no account of the component that only experience can provide.

In attempting to give such an account, we concentrated upon three aspects that often escape attention in our current mode of thought. The first of these is the mental activity by which we attend to a particular phenomenon. In the school of philosophy known as European Phenomenology this activity is termed *intentionality*, and it is understood as the activity by which we *understand* and *pick out*

the phenomena on which we focus attention.

We are all aware of the activity by which we correct our first perceptual take in the double-take, finding that better way of looking that finally reveals the paper fragment or stunted bush that we originally took to be something else. We may make a closer examination of the same activity when we are able to switch between two phenomena-seeing, for instance, the reflection of trees in the water near the shore of the lake, and then switching to seeing the bottom of the same shallows and ignoring the play of light on the surface. Here we may grasp, at will, the same sensible situation in different ways, but by this *mental* shift we alter phenomenal appearances as well, since the reflection cannot be seen while inspecting the bottom, nor can the bottom be seen while observing the reflected trees. Thus an experiential account must become aware of the intentional activity by which the observer *brought* the sensible situation to phenomenal understanding, while an account abstracted from experience need speak only of a reflection or a muddy bottom. Because intentionality is a form of conceptual activity, the intentions by which perception is actualized become *meanings* immanent in the resulting phenomenon, but absent in the abstracted report.

A second aspect of immediate experience is the *aesthetic* organization of phenomena. Phenomena are unified wholes rather than mere collections of parts. The principle that produces a phenomenal unity, however, is advanced to a sensible situation through the intentional act of *recognition*, a form of cognition left behind by works of abstraction. Within acts of recognition it is the unifying element that *clarifies the object*, and thus remains immanent in the resulting phenomenon: the *lawful* (or universal) is immanent in the individual. Western science has reached the lawfulness of phenomena by abstracting very general statements and leaving the individual perceptions behind. The general rule, which will apply to a multiplicity of cases, can be connected with individual situations only by neglecting the individual nature of those situations.

The modes of understanding found in immediate experience and scientific treatment are mutually exclusive, but *complementary*. Statements of law are entirely general and can be used to deduce particular situations only as these are categorized within a general class. Conversely, experience deals with immediate particulars and produces understanding only as these are intentionally unified into greater and greater phenomenal wholes. While abstraction moves away from experience into propositions, which may then be logically handled, experience moves away from *thinking in propositions* to *thinking* (intending) *in phenomena*, which phenomena may then be grasped in a more aesthetic fashion-i.e., brought to greater unity. We take this approach to be a legitimate mode of knowledge, with applications yet to be developed systematically.

The third aspect of immediate experience that we wanted to investigate is its ability to motivate the experiencing individual. We customarily assume that experience wields the greatest power to change the human being, and thus to alter motivation, yet this existential dimension is rarely part of modern discussions. Much of ethical philosophy offers abstract universals as ethical precepts, and applies these even as statements of law are applied in present science-i.e., by neglecting the individual character of experience and fitting situations into

general classes. From this viewpoint nothing can be said about the individualizing nature of experience or the importance of a particular event to a particular biography. Thus it seems that the very criterion of 'objectivity' at the center of modern scientific practice has tended to reduce the concrete springs of motivation to the subjective whims of the individual. As a result we lack the ability to account for the value wielded by our perceptual encounters, and the resulting picture of the human being appears inconsistent. The authors think that individual moral responsibility needs to be firmly grounded in the *meaning* of individual experience, but such grounding can be obtained only within a world-view that recognizes such meaning.

The *goal* of this effort is not, of course, merely a theory of knowledge, but a new relation to the world and a new manner of being in it. The treatment of that world in terms of general laws, accurate though it may be, is not without effect on the perceptual level; after all, if law is conceived only in these abstract terms, the individual phenomena and their immediate sensible qualities must appear largely accidental. Yet the effort put into the sciences was not initiated by an interest in power alone, but also by our need to achieve an intelligible picture of the world. If that need can find no redress on the level of immediate experience, then experience-phenomenal nature-must fail to satisfy the human being.

For many centuries the arts and the humanities permeated our perception of the world, teaching us how to be human, both in terms of our understanding of ourselves and of our world. With the rise of modern science, however, and the resulting split between scientific understanding and perceptual qualities, these two traditional sources of intelligibility no longer wield their usual power to illuminate the relation between the human being and the cosmos. Our present one-sided development threatens to reduce the world of appearances to a sum total of accidents, which might as well have been different. An aesthetic grasp of such a situation becomes impossible due to the manifest absence of unity, and the human individual feels almost equally accidental. If the development of modern science is inexorable, it must also follow

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that a complementary investigation of phenomena *qua* phenomena must respond to the resulting divorce between (scientific) intelligibility and experience, rediscovering the lawful and inevitable in immediate appearances and saving the goal of *being human* in a new manner.

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