

# Interpretation

## **Challenging Traditional Prejudices**

What could be more obvious than that there is a world outside us and that we must make choices about how to deal with it? When we think about our place in the world, this is almost always what we imagine. Is it so obvious though? Is this the proper way to describe our situation? We can be a bit more precise.

When we reflect on ourselves, we typically start by recognizing ourselves as discrete agents facing a world about which we must make choices. The world is made up, it seems, of things with discrete identities that are present to us, right here, right now. On this familiar view, then, reality is a kind of aggregate, a bunch of distinct, separately existing things, one of which—me—faces those others and must self-consciously orchestrate her dealings with those things. These last few sentences, it seems to me, sum up the very core of almost all of our thinking experience of ourselves. Though quite simple, they nonetheless express the “theory” of reality with which we typically operate. The significance of these familiar views for our lives is immense. “And why not?” one might ask, since, “after all, those sentences describe how things really are, so they should be the foundation for everything we think.” Indeed, this view seems so compelling as to be indubitable. It is, in fact, a standard way to mock philosophers to claim that they do doubt these ideas, wondering whether chairs exist, or whether they themselves really exist: these claims, in other words, seem so obvious that one would have to be a fool to entertain doubt about them.

Whether or not the philosophers should be mocked, it remains true that this cartoon of philosophical activity does in an important way describe the real work of philosophy. Indeed, it seems to me that the history of philosophy in general, and twentieth-century thought in particular, has taught us to be wary of the vision of the world described in my first sentences. As suggested above, the significance of these views is

indeed immense, but not because they are true. Rather, their significance comes from the extent to which our lives are crippled by too readily accepting this “theory” of things and of ourselves.

In the twentieth century, opposition to these views has come from many quarters. In recent years, ecologists have done a great deal to show us that our identities cannot be easily severed from the natural environments in which we live. Psychologists, for one hundred years at least, have investigated a wide range of experiences in which people do not seem to be free agents with full possession of the power of choice. Sociologists and anthropologists have shown how the way in which we see the world is largely reflective of cultural prejudices, so the identities of the objects we encounter are not clearly separable from our own social identities. All of these insights challenge the easy separation of subject and object upon which our familiar view is based.

Probably the single most important aspect of the critique of this familiar view is found in the recognition that our experience is always interpretive: whatever perception we have of the world is shaped by our efforts to organize and integrate all of the dimensions of our experience into a coherent whole. How we go about this will be dictated by the level of our education, by our expectations, and by our desires, and so the vision we have will always be as much a reflection of ourselves and our prejudices as it is a discovery of “how things really are.” In other words, the very way that we see things reveals secrets about us: what we see reveals what we are looking for, what we are interested in. This is as true of our vision of things that we take to be outside us as it is of our vision of ourselves.

Focusing on the interpretive dimension to all experience allows us to shift away from the typical perspective we have upon ourselves on one side and the world on the other. We can now turn to our experience of the world and ask, “What do we reveal about ourselves through the way we experience?” or, “Who do we reveal ourselves to be by the way in which we see ourselves and our world?” When, for example, one of us experiences America as “home,” this is not because there is some intrinsic property to America that makes it “homey.” Rather, what we experience as the character of this object is fundamentally a reflection of our own expectations of security and ease of operation, based upon our memories of, and habituation to, this place. To others, of course, this same setting is threatening and oppressive. The homey or threatening character of this site is a reflection of our developed identities, and not of an inherent

feature of the independent objects that confront us. Similarly, the experience of a woodland setting as a site for camping or as a site for logging reveals the interpretive perspective with which one engages with the world, rather than revealing the independent essence of the forest. This interpretive dimension, we shall see, is at play at every level of experience, from the most basic to the most developed forms of experience.

Shifting our focus to the interpretive dimension of experience opens up for us a new field of inquiry, a new object of study, namely, the field of our interpretive acts, the field of those acts through which we reveal the forms and limits of our powers of interpretation. Instead of accepting our immediate view of ourselves as obviously being discrete agents facing a world of present things about which we must make choices, we are now led to find our own identities to be a problem, a question. The same holds true for the things of the world. We are led to ask what the principles are behind the interpretive acts that give to us an integrated vision of ourselves and our world, who or what the agency is that enacts those interpretive principles, whether those principles are right, what consequences this structure of interpretation has, and so on. We are left, in short, with a task of discerning and evaluating the acts of interpretation that make our experience appear the way it does. We must, then, get clear on just how our experience does appear to us, with an eye to uncovering its founding acts of interpretation. I now want to give brief descriptions of some familiar experiences in order to show how interpretation is at play in our experience, and thereby to launch us into a new account of who we are and what our world is, that is, a new account of the relation of subject and object that is opposed to our familiar prejudices about ourselves and our world.

### **Interpretation, Synthesis, and Temporality**

Think of what it is like to listen to music. Imagine a melody. Note that I say “a” melody: in an important sense the melody is single. It is certainly intrinsically varied, passing as it does through different pitches and rhythms, but what makes it a melody is that these differences are not separated one from the other. To hear a melody is precisely to retain the already sounded notes as a context against which the presently sounding note is being experienced, and to hear this note as equally anticipating further musical developments that will relate to the sound so far heard. To be a hearer of music, then, is at least to be able to entertain diversity within a single conscious act.

These diverse features of the music are not just lumped together like beans in a jar, either; rather, they are experienced as integrated, as mutually interpreting and contextualizing. The different notes do not just fall alongside each other, but are heard as working together in an organized fashion to allow the unity, the identity, of the music to express itself. To hear the music as music is to be able to hear how the multiplicity works together to achieve a unitary result. The experience of listening to music is well-described by Jean-Paul Sartre in his novel *Le Nausée*:

At the moment, jazz is playing; there is no melody, just notes, a myriad of little quiverings. They don't know any rest, an inflexible order gives birth to them and destroys them, without even giving them the chance to recover, to exist for themselves. They run, they rush, they strike me in passing with a sharp blow, and they annihilate themselves. I'd really like to hold onto them, but I know that if I managed to stop one of them, there would be nothing left between my fingers but a roguish, languid sound. I must accept their death, indeed I must *will* it. (p. 36, my translation)

As this example makes clear, listening to music is an experience built out of the relations between and among the notes, and it is an active experience in the sense that it requires a well-prepared and engaged listener. The notes of a jazz tune fly past, and in so doing they carve out a space that one can inhabit with one's imagination in concentrated attention or with one's swinging body in dance. But this musical reality cannot be frozen and grasped—it only exists in its temporal passing. A particular note, so exciting or moving when heard at the climax of some passage in the song, has none of its force if separated out and heard in isolation. The other notes that contextualize the note we are now hearing are both past and future, and these temporal determinations are not contingent features, but are definitive formal features of the music, that is, the temporal order is essential: to play the same notes in a different order would be to play a different piece of music. Music, then, only exists for a being that can “tell time,” so to speak. The music can only be heard by one who attends to the music in the integrity of its flow, who hears the sense of the music passed on from one note to the next. The listener must come to inhabit the music, join with it in anticipating its further development, and hear the notes that present themselves in the context of what has already sounded. Sometimes we cannot hear this integration and sense within the sounds, when we hear styles of music with which we are not familiar, and it can take a great deal of time and effort on our part to

“develop an ear” for such music. It is only when we have developed this ability to hear how the various parts work together that we really consider ourselves to be hearing the music. It is only because we can be thus “musical” that there can be music for us. Such musicality is a form of our general ability to comprehend the integration or unitary sense of a temporally extended, experiential diversity.

This power to comprehend an inherently temporal, varied, single experience we can call (following the practice of Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*), “synthesis,” meaning the ability to recognize things in their togetherness. The particular synthetic power of maintaining as definitive of the present that which is not in itself present (i.e., in our example, the past and future music), has traditionally been called “imagination,” that is, the ability to entertain in consciousness that which is not currently present. Such imaginative synthesis is the precondition, the *conditio sine qua non*, of our experience of temporally meaningful, intrinsically varied unities. This means, in fact, that such imaginative synthesis is the condition of our experience *simpliciter*, for all experiences are temporal and intrinsically varied: all our experiences carry on something like this melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic flow whereby one moment seems to grow out of the last and to melt into the next in a way that “keeps the tune going,” so to speak, while developing it into a new richness.

Typically, when we think of imagination we think of fantasizing or engaging in some kind of fanciful and self-conscious extrapolation beyond what is real. In referring to imagination here, however, we must not think simply of what we explicitly do when we daydream. Rather, the imagining under consideration here is an activity we never do without. To feel in some situation that we have “arrived” is to experience that moment in light of the context set up by what preceded it: the present is here experienced in light of the no-longer-present. Again, a sudden feeling of fear or comfort in some setting is the experience of that present in light of what is not-yet-present, what threatens. We can also imagine countless examples of richer ways in which our daily experience evinces a harmonic and rhythmic flow that allows the experience of a certain melodic unity, a certain sense. A conversation with a colleague over dinner, the passing of the workday, the recognition of my friend’s familiar footsteps on the stairs, the ability to drive a car—steer, accelerate, shift gears, turn off the windshield wipers, watch the road, read the signs, listen to the radio, smoke, talk with my passenger, stop and go with the traffic light—these are so many synthetic experiences, experiences dependent

on our power of imagination, integrated experiences of a unified sense being manifested through a complex and temporally varied diversity. That power we are familiar with in our self-conscious daydreaming is rather a luxurious use of this most basic power we have to hold together—to synthesize—what is present with what is not present, the power that underlies all of our experience. As experiencers, then, we simply are synthetic processes of imaginative interpretation.

Just as we can be misled by the term *imagination*, so can we be similarly misled by the description of our experience as interpretive or synthetic. Typically, we think of interpretation as an activity we perform upon an already acquired object, and synthesis, similarly might typically suggest binding together two pieces that are already present. This typical model of an action performed upon an already acquired material is not, however, the proper model for understanding the interpretive character of experience. Experience is not a two-stage process in which we first get data and then construct an interpretation. On the contrary, it is only as already shaped by our interpretive orientation that our experience ever begins. In other words, the way we immediately notice the new moments of our experience is always in terms of the meaningful contexts we have already been developing. This point will be clearer if we consider another experience.

When I hear a language spoken that is foreign to me, I hear sounds—perhaps a kind of “music.” This is the only level on which the speaker’s speaking impinges on me meaningfully. This, however, is not the experience of others who might be around me who understand the language: those who know the language would react in a way that I could neither predict nor explain—indeed, if I did not know intellectually what was happening, the situation would appear more as a kind of magical conjuring than as communication, with the sounds being sent out in the hope of creating some response. The only way I could come to understand this language would be to engage in an elaborate process of language study, which would eventually involve listening to these sounds and constructing an interpretation. This process of language study, then, is an experience that does involve a two-step process of data collection and interpretation. What is noteworthy about this is that it is an uncommon or extraordinary approach to language: this is not the way we usually experience hearing language spoken.

To hear a foreign language is to hear uninterpretable music with magical effects. When I hear someone speak my own language, however,

everything changes. Rather than “conjuring,” one who speaks my language seems to be handing me meanings directly. I do not have to establish what words the sounds represent and then struggle to decide what story these words tell. On the contrary, in normal circumstances the other’s meaning is immediately available to me. In fact, in listening to speech, I usually do not hear “sounds” at all, but am offered instead an intelligible world. Indeed, the “raw sounds” of my own language are for me a kind of aural “blind spot.” I cannot really hear the “music” of the sounds of my own language: I do not know what my language “sounds like” in the way that I can recognize the typical sounds of a foreign language. Indeed, far from having to make sense of sounds that I hear, the meaningfulness of my language holds me in a context where I have no option besides hearing the meanings. In other words, I am not capable of not understanding what meanings are being presented when I hear another speaking.

We here notice the basic form taken by our imaginative interpretation. Only in hearing a foreign language, that is, a language that does not live for us, do we hear sounds that suggest to us a problem for interpretation. When I hear my own living language, this stage of reflective interpretation does not happen at all, and it is this experience that reveals the form that interpretation fundamentally takes in our experience. The interpretation that constitutes experience is not a two-stage act of first receiving an uninterpreted object and then overlaying it with an interpretation; rather, it is only as already interpreted that there is for me a phenomenon. There are no raw data awaiting organization by a subsequent act. In experience, I directly perceive the object as a unitary, already meaningful phenomenon. Only subsequently can the different elements be separated out from their initial “melodic” presentation through an act of reflective consideration. They are not experienced prior to, and external to, the unified phenomenon. The interpretive character of our experience, in other words, is our distinctive way of originally being open to something making sense to us at all: interpretation does not have a raw material, but is how we first become open to having any “material” at all. Indeed, whatever would count as “material” would already need to be acknowledged by us as a recognizable unity, and this recognition of unity would already involve activities of interpretive synthesis.

Let us carry further this account of how the interpretive experience is given as already unified. I have already mentioned the place of anticipation

in the experience of the presence of the melody. I want to work toward taking up this temporal dimension more carefully by first considering experiential phenomena in terms of their “expressive” capacity. In particular, I want to describe how the objects of our experience lead us down paths of expectation in a way that we experience as compelling: we experience objects as demanding of us that we develop our situation toward a specific future.

In our day-to-day dealings we rely heavily upon habits we have developed for coping with the most familiar situations. It may be the case that each morning we go through the same routine for making coffee, or that we drive the same route to get to work. Sometimes we deliberately set out to change our routine. This is not always easy, however. Sometimes we launch ourselves down a new path and we find unexpectedly that our habits have taken over and that we have done the usual thing rather than carrying out the atypical action we had intended. Perhaps I began making coffee when I did not want to, or I found myself driving to work when I meant to go somewhere else. In such experiences, our habitual ways of behaving show themselves to be more powerful than our explicit reflective decisions.

What these experiences reveal is that the familiar objects of our world have a kind of momentum within experience that can shape our behavior. This shows the inadequacy of our typical assumption that objects exist in a state of independence and indifference to us, and that they are easily subjected to our choices. The experiences of unintentionally making coffee and unintentionally driving to work show that I do not encounter my kitchen utensils as indifferent disconnected objects that I subsequently decide how to use, nor do I encounter indifferent spatial locations in relation to which I decide my path. On the contrary, I experience interpretively charged environments, things, and places that carry within them a directive force. Just as we saw in the experience of hearing my native language, here too what I experience are environments that already have meanings embedded in them, and the kinds of meanings they have are essentially directional, that is, they direct my actions toward some end. The coffeepot bears within it its connection to other things and to me, and it simply means “plug me in”; the intersection at the end of the block means “go left.” It is as thus making these demands upon me that I immediately experience these objects. The phenomena of my world are fundamentally expressive, and they express themselves in the form of demands, of calls to action. They present



themselves as expectant, pregnant with anticipated fulfillment, and express a call to me to complete them, to satisfy them, to be the deliverance of their latent significance. Objects are not indifferent and alien, and they do not passively receive our explicit choices. They draw us forward like magnets, without our self-conscious control.

Contrary to our traditional assumptions, then, this is the form that experience typically takes: we are imaginative, interpretive, synthetic subjects for whom objects are meaningful calls to action that direct our life without our self-conscious intervention. Objects as they figure within our experience are not discrete and alien, but, like notes in a melody, they are embedded in contexts with other objects with which they mutually interpenetrate, and they *already* penetrate and impinge upon us. We, in turn, find ourselves already committed to various situations such that we find our choices made for us, rather than being self-contained choosers who stand aloof from things.

Notice that this description, by showing that we are not the alienated, autonomous choosers we typically take ourselves to be, also shows that our familiar assumption that we can easily know ourselves through simple introspection is mistaken. We cannot immediately know ourselves through simple introspection, because the view that introspection gives is the very view we have just criticized. Self-knowledge, that is, does not come through the easy reflection upon ourselves that we typically rely upon, but, on the contrary, will only come through a study of the determinate forms of interpretive synthesis that can be discerned within the character of objective calls to action ("objective" in the sense of, "pertaining to the nature of the object"): the terms in which we experience the object as calling upon us reflect the values and projects through which we experience the world. Our preliminary results have shown that such a study of the implicit significance of the forms of our objects, by revealing the temporal, synthetic character of experience, will be a critique of the familiar view of the self as immediately present to itself as a chooser amid present, discrete objects.

Our talk of interpretation could be recast to say that it is our prejudices that are reflected in the way we experience the world. Our study so far was itself already designed to challenge some of our most basic prejudices. Perhaps the general prejudice that most informs our experience, and of which the various prejudices we studied are species, could be called the prejudice of "presence." We typically treat reality as if the truth of things is in their immediate presence, and as if it is by being

immediately present to something that we get its truth. Thus we take ourselves to be able to be immediately present to ourselves through introspection, we take things to be present to us as objects confronting our perception, we trust the “reporter” who was “present” at the event over the “interpreter” who appraises the event by evidence collected by others, we treat things as if their reality is present in them and in them alone, and so on. Our study of the synthetic, temporal, interpretive form of experience has already shown us how this privileging of presence is a significant misrepresentation, inasmuch as the subject is not immediately present to introspection, neither the object nor the subject holds its identity simply present within itself alone, and all experience is inherently mediated by interpretation and time.

Our description of the basic form that experience takes has begun to show us the inadequacies of the prejudice in favor of presence, and this critique can be developed further. Rather than recognizing presence as the ultimate ground of reality, the full-fledged description of experience—the philosophical approach called “phenomenology”—would show *negativity, difference, deferral, absence, distance, ambiguity, duplicity, and concealment* to be the primary terms in which the motor and substance of our world is to be articulated rather than simply the *positivity, self-sameness, immediacy, presence, proximity, clarity, univocity, and obviousness* that our prejudice insists on. Rather than looking to some supposedly independent object in order to find out its intrinsic sense, phenomenology will consider how it is that the objects of our experience are meaningful only in light of their contextualization within the structures of memory and expectation that define a particular perspective. We can begin to see this inversion of traditional values if we look once more at the experience of listening to a melody.

The melody is only present to us through the differing of the notes, and the notes themselves are present only insofar as they point behind themselves, reinvoking the absent, contextualizing past, and point ahead of themselves, deferring the fullness of the musical moment to the controlling power of the notes yet to come: the presence of the melody is precisely how the notes differ. What we naively take to be “hearing a note” is thus truly a hearing of what the single note is not. And, indeed, more than just the notes not-being each other, it is our own not-being the melody itself—being aware of it precisely by not simply being identical with it, not being utterly absorbed in it, but still reserving the distance that is “being aware of”—that lets the melody be. “There is”

a note, then, only insofar as it is an arrangement of negations, both the ordered negation of the contextualizing notes that precede it, succeed it, and harmonize it, and the negation of the one for whom there is a melody. To hear a melody is precisely to hear what is realized through these “is nots.”

These two sides of “the negative”—the absence that is past and future and the distance that is the awareness—are in truth the same. The past is how the awareness still holds on to that which has been and the future is how the awareness already holds on to that which will be. This is what we first recognized in referring to experience as a temporal synthesis: it is as retaining and expecting that one is able to be aware of (by being distant from) a present. It is this temporal character of experience that is the “negativity” that lets there be presence. It is by our existing as temporalizing—as engaging past, present, and future together—that there is a present. (The very concept of the present itself points to this conclusion: “now” only is to the extent that it is not “then,” that is, now brings into relief *now* what is not now, and thus the very premise of presence itself is that there is presence only because it makes present what is not present.) The very nature of our subjectivity, then, is to be “simultaneously” in the past, the present, and the future. Just as our object is never a simple present but is constituted by negation and absence, so are we never fully present, never simply here, but instead we are always outside of ourselves, somewhere other than where we are. It is by being retaining and expecting that we can be present—that there can be something present to us—and it will thus be by understanding our processes of retention and expectation that we will come to understand who we are and what our world is. It is our memories and our goals that are condensed into the presentation—the appearing—that is experience. How things are present, then, is the revelation of our projects and our memories. It is indeed in the present that we will find out who we are, but only after we have abandoned the prejudice of the primacy of presence.

We must, then, turn to what is presented—turn to the appearing that is experience—and let it show us who we are. This approach to the description of consciousness that is not prejudiced in favor of the present entails that we must let ourselves be guided by *how* the present presents itself, and allow its movement to reveal to us who it is who is experiencing, rather than beginning with views taken from our familiar vision of things and insisting that these be used to explain what is experienced.

**Description, Happening, and Situation**

If we free ourselves of the traditional prejudices about the subject and the object as fully present and mutually alien entities between which a relation has to be created, what our description of experience reveals instead is that the relation itself comes first, that is, it is from the primary relation—the act of experiencing—that subject and object come to be established, and not vice versa. What is first is a situation of experience in which all of the participants—subjects and objects—are already shaped and defined by the others. The subject and the object are not indifferent beings that might or might not come into relation: they are already involved, each having a grip on the other. How the object exists is reflective of the interpretive demands of the subject; equally, the subject is already subordinated to the demands of the object. In other words, each taken by itself is an abstraction, something that can only be separated in reflective thought and not in reality. We must, therefore, reorient our thinking and conceive of a subject who is intrinsically situated, or an environment that intrinsically calls for someone to resolve it. What exists is a situation that is meaningful, a situation that is experienced as a range of tensions, a situation that needs certain things to be done. Human reality is this situation, this event of meaning, this happening of a subject-object pair.

In identifying the subject-object pair as the human reality, we have gone beyond any appeal either to a more original choosing agent that goes out to meet an alien object, or to an objective truth that forces itself onto an alien subject for explaining why things are the way that they are. This is because we have seen that the subject and the object so conceived only exist as abstracted aspects of the meaningful situation, the comprehending relation. This entails that there is nothing beyond this meaningful situation to which one could turn to justify, explain, test, or prove the significance of human reality. Consequently, it is what occurs as the situation of human meaning that must be the ground, guide, and measure of all our investigations and self-interpretations. In order to know, then, we will rely on the authority neither of the scientist nor the theologian. Knowledge will ultimately be a matter of describing what happens, and this description of the form experience takes will be the last word.

We have begun such a description of the form of the human situation in this chapter. We have seen the decisive roles of remembering and projecting in shaping this situation. In chapter 2 we will see that this story of the remembering projector who is the intertwining of subject and object is the story of the body-subject that forms habits.