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Phenomenology of Listening and the Challenge of Writing Sound - Adam Potts

A whispered preamble

How does writing attend to listening? Are we to be diary keeping auditors, trying to bring sound into words as we hear them? Do we begin from the region of affect, attending to the immediacy of experience with a language sympathetic to its heterogeneous qualities? More importantly, is there even a distance between writing and sound or is sound already within meaning, making listening something akin to reading? Or is writing about sound, beyond the social and political, destined for obscurity?

It is with these questions in mind that this paper begins and it is with the radical uncertainty of the last that this paper ends. In many respects, this is a challenge to phenomenology. While phenomenology might seem like the sturdiest way of approaching sound – as a philosophy of experience and embodiment it seems like an obvious place to think about listening – cracks, splits and openings appear on its surface in the moment of writing. Beyond the immediacy of listening we begin to reflect – of which writing is a discernibly committed attempt – and in this moment a distance begins to surface between the words written and the sound heard. Writing pushes the listener beyond the phenomenon of listening into a space of symbolic evocations. Yet this distance and echo of sound manifests in writing as a hollow, yet sonorous, cavity – rumbling beneath the surface of meaning. In this respect, writing about sound challenges phenomenology by bringing forward a space similar to Maurice Blanchot's space of literature; rather than confirm the listening experience or the listening subject, it brings us to the incommunicable centre of the self and the world.

No more is this tense relationship between writing and sound apparent than in the work of Daniela Cascella, as she enjoys an intimacy of "hidden processes ... incoherence [and] whispers" (Cascella, 2015, p. 12) much like the obscurity draped over the Blanchotian text. For both writers, writing is always in decay but what decays in the writing about sound or in Cascella's words, writing sound? Simply

put, everything that was present in the moment of listening: "To write after listening is to forget the sense and the scene" (Casella, 2015, p. 43). Despite the history, memories and circulation of instances and sensualities, writing can only chase and fall further and further behind that which it tries to write. It seems, then, that the experience of listening – as it is brought to reflection in the moment of writing – cannot constitute or confirm any notion of the subject (in the way phenomenology might allow). Instead, the interplay between listening and reflection (here emphasised in terms of writing) radically alters the experience, or better the memory, of sound and with it, the subject that listens.

It is with the notion of a sonically fragmented subjectivity that this paper will stake its claim as a challenge to phenomenology. Admitting to a broad stroke, phenomenology will be approached in its Husserlian (transcendental; eidetic) and Heideggerian (hermeneutic; authentic) frameworks. And thus when discussing the phenomenology of listening we are thinking about a subject that is said to be at the centre of the listening experience. Writing sound will be shown to rupture with this phenomenology of listening as it passes through phenomenology on its way to impossibility.

Sound, philosophy and musicology

The relationship between sound and philosophy is both deep and rich. It is one brought into focus by Adrienne Janus who writes of an "anti-ocular" turn in philosophy, of which Jean-Luc Nancy's text *Listening* (2002) is of particular interest (Janus, 2011). This "turn" – characterised by aural metaphors, accounts of listening and a general interest in acoustic phenomena – has ontological, metaphysical and, importantly, phenomenological resonances. It seems that listening, for Nancy at least, is a threshold moment wherein the heterogeneity of the subject that listens is exposed. What brings us to this recognition is phenomenological by nature; to attend to the experiential of sound we need phenomenology. But once phenomenology gets us there we meet a limit. As Frances Dyson writes in his book *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*: "the phenomenological characteristics of sound and listening [...] describing a flow or process rather than a thing, a mode of being in a constant state of flux, and a polymorphous subjectivity" (Dyson, 2009, p.5).

In musicology and sound studies, phenomenology supplements the development from positivist analyses of music, as well as the general backwater of journalistic

writing, to *new musicology* (which is inclusive of the social, political, cultural and affective range of music). We might think of this development as a response to two fundamental limitations. On the one hand, there was the need to break away from the use of the "adjective" in musical criticism – this was Roland Barthes argument in his essay 'The Grain of the Voice' – the adjective being, for Barthes, one of the "poorest linguistic qualities" (Barthes, 1972/2012, p. 504). And on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, the need to break away from positivist/technical analyses of music that treated music as an "object" of analysis.

These moves are driven by the idea that sound is not simply reducible to technical analysis alone or to a crude subjectivism. Although we can do this – we can explore musical notes, volume, duration and express an opinion about it in these ways – at the risk of stating the obvious, this does not exhaust the listening experience. This is because sound is a process, one in a constant state of flux and therefore cannot be frozen by idealisation. Philosophically, then, the horizon of temporality that constitutes the orientation of phenomenology seems like the only option for sound understood as process and flux.

The problem

But the phenomenological account of listening – which would involve a descriptive/interpretative account of the listening experience – is still a slippery business. Broadly speaking, the aim of phenomenology is meaning; the unification of experience in the present. This notion of unity is, for Heidegger, contained in Being; this is why ontology stands as the culmination of phenomenology in Heidegger's thought. If we can speak of phenomenology in general terms at all (the disparity of phenomenological frameworks perhaps suggesting otherwise) we might speak of it as a philosophy interested in the constitution of the subject and how this subject "make sense" of the experience in question without relying on ordinary categories of understanding. The challenge faced by any phenomenology of listening is, then, to describe this polymorphous subjectivity that constitutes the intentionality between the listening subject and the sound listened to. Put simply, how can we adequately account for what we hear and how can this help us understand who we are? What would the phenomenology of listening entail?

For Cascella, writing sound inhabits a space of otherness and absence. In other words, the sound object is not something that can easily be brought into sense and meaning. Listening, for Cascella, is an experience that does not constitute the

subject but puts it in jeopardy. Her texts are a radical autobiography in this sense as its sonic fragmentations, tangents and excursions delay the possibility of an ontological homecoming. Listening is not one operation by which the subject is able to negotiate a clear relationship with the world; sound is non-diegetic in her text, echoing from everywhere and nowhere, resonating in the texts she reads and murmuring in the words she writes. In short, it is not something reducible to the noetico-noematic of Husserlian poles of experience. Her writing is a manifestation of impossibility, based on the fundamental injunction that "listening and writing are bound to remain strangers to each other" (Cascella, 2012, p. 101). But as strangers they are held in close proximity by a messianic union; hope is what lets Cascella write.

The disjuncture between listening and writing – which is the same as the disjuncture between listening and the aims of the phenomenological method – is the result of both remembrance and conceptual negation. Writing sound occurs in a space of absence, which is partly tied to the act of remembering. Memory, for Cascella, "means to construct an impression of a lost presence" (Cascella, 2012, p. 101) which is often beholden to memory's *desire*. There's no such thing as memory proper; memories are always diluted by that present which equally shapes our futural trajectories, both of which are constituted by an unmanageable tapestry of influences of which we are both active and passive recipients. This is why Cascella's work is not simply a description of sounds but an interconnectivity of quotations, sculptures, geographies and imagination. All of these displace the clarity of manifestation. Simply put, the experience we are writing about is not present during the act of writing – memory collides with the inexorable insistence of multiple imaginings. As Cascella writes: 'The landscape of writing sound appears like a *mise en abîme* with blurred margins, where the frame of each new scene fades into the next and is not clearly defined: where memories and words from the past are renewed in the now" (Cascella, 2012, p. 102).

Implicit to this displaced manifestation is also the negation that occurs during the process of conceptuality; the abstraction that occurs in the moment of writing. Cascella is fascinated by the dislocation of conceptuality in authors like Pasolini, Manganelli, Melville and Gaddan. For Cascella, these authors capture the endeavour to write but one that is preoccupied with the dimension of absence. In these authors, words are not symbols of certainty but ghostly apparitions of a singularity that never was. Like Blanchot, they recognise the distance between the symbol and the referent and do not try to correct it. It is an impossibility that is irrefutable – one that is the condition of the work beyond the efforts of the author. Negation is thus another moment of distance between the singularity of listening and the generality of the word.

Resonances with Blanchot

What's significant about Blanchot is what illustrates his relevance to Cascella; Blanchot entertains an idea that fundamentally breaks with phenomenology and ontology. As Kevin Hart and Geoffrey Hartman in their book *The Power of Contestation* suggest, Blanchot is a theoretical hedgehog rather than a fox. What they are referencing here is the Greek poet Archilochus and his fragment "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing". Their suggestion is that, like the hedgehog, Blanchot's writing is concerned with one big idea, and this idea is, as they say, the "outside, the impossible, or the neutral" (Hart and Hartman, 2004, p.15). Blanchot's challenge to metaphysics, to the extent that he can be thought of as having one, is the idea that everything, particularly language and signification, emerges from a void of impossibility and nothingness. But this is not some form of cheap nihilism; rather his thought radically alters the terms of possibility by introducing, within it, an irremediable incompleteness. Literary language is the space in which this incompleteness surfaces as the rupture within meaning. As the world emerges from a pool of impossibility it has no determinable centre and this is realised in language. Quoting Mallarmé, Blanchot writes: "'I say: a flower!' and I have in front of my eyes neither a flower, nor an image of a flower, nor a memory of a flower, but an absence of flower. 'Silenced object'" (Blanchot, 1949, p. 30).

In his essay *From Anguish to Language* Blanchot suggests "A writer who writes "I am alone" [...] can seem a little ludicrous. It is comical to be aware of one's solitude while addressing a reader, making use of means that keep one from being alone. The word *alone* is as general as the word *bread*. As soon as one utters it, one makes present everything that excludes it" (Blanchot, 1943, p. 1). Similarly for Cascella, to write about sound is to make present everything that excludes the experience itself. Not only does the act of recollection involve a distance but the act of writing refuses to make present the sound in question because of the process of abstraction. By her own admission, her writing is at first "a remnant of a story, a trace of the experience that made it", and "then it is a book" (Cascella, 2012, p.130). It is only in the remnant and in the absence of the experience of the sonic object itself, that her writing arrives as an impossible writing that never quite captures the experience in question. It is only by removing the places she writes about and by recalling a moment of listening that has passed, that Cascella can begin writing. For both Cascella and Blanchot writing is something that begins after phenomenology; it pushes through the subjective condition of experience into a region beyond the subject. Upon reflection, what is revealed is not consolidated by a renewed subjectivity.

Literature for Blanchot opens a space that challenges phenomenology in that the absence upon which it is based is not reducible to phenomenological analysis; it cannot be folded into meaning as this absence cannot be exhausted by the idea of intentionality or authenticity. Derrida's thoughts on Levinas are relevant here: it is a thought that "fundamentally no longer seeks to be the thought of Being and phenomenality [it] makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession" (Derrida, 1967, p. 101).

In short, the nothingness in Blanchot's thought is not redemptive; it risks fragmenting the knowledge of who we are. Blanchot is ultimately trying to articulate that which escapes meaning and subjectivity. Similarly, Cascella shows the challenge of writing about sound, not simply as the challenge of overcoming the adjective or the challenge of developing a more interpretative voice but the challenge of writing about sound itself – the challenge of making clear what phenomenology takes as evident, namely listening or the experience/phenomenality of sound. Like Blanchot's discussion of literature, Cascella complicates the phenomenological approach by showing how any interpretation extends beyond itself into a region it cannot contain. And this is partly because the act of listening is directed at something that is in flux and temporally always other to itself.

Time and the fragment

The construction of identity based on a phenomenology of listening would involve a dynamic understanding of the self in the world based on sonic experiences. This for Cascella involves the "mapping of experience" in which places, people and memories are "woven again and again into the now" by the demand of writing which comes, ultimately, as a way of "seeing and telling the world" (Cascella, 2012, p.80). But this world and our phenomenological interpretation is not linear. There is no solid and clear position from where to begin. The sound experience in question is dynamic and fluid – it is not the experience of a concrete object; it is experienced as an affect. The development of affect in a range of theories from queer theory, feminist theory, philosophy and political theory is distinct from simply a feeling or emotion, although it contains both. The complexity of affect is contained in its potentiality – affect names the mutability of intensities. In the case of sound, and according to Cascella, it refers to the fact that we are unable to write about sound from an authentic, present position. As Cascella recalls sound, she recalls things she has read, places that are evoked in the echo of the sound, relationships had during the time of listening – as well as everything present now in the act of writing and everything which might come in future listening experiences. In short, the listening subject and the identity which listening might be said to give us, is fragmented, constituted by an interconnectivity of feelings, memory, conceptuality and potential.

There is, therefore, an unusual treatment of time in Cascella's writing. Through a haze of memory and broken recollection she is able to complicate the linearity of her writing, offering a complex temporality of listening. In her fragmentary and non-linear writing, she calls us to enter into the space of sound which, in our communication of this space, necessitates a kind of Deleuzian temporality where the simultaneity of past and future pull in the formation of an incongruous listening present. Where, in the opening pages of Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Alice cannot, in Lewis Carroll's work, be said to become larger than she was without simultaneously being smaller than she becomes, one cannot write about the actual listening experience, that is both isolated and solipsistic, without reaching beyond this very isolation. Equally, one cannot have the musical material in any pure sense once it is doubly negated into a form of writing. While not explicitly Deleuzian, Cascella's writing sound nevertheless invites us to be time travellers, giving presence over to memory and potential. Cascella's writing is not restricted to one experience but jumps, without rhyme or reason, following the disparate networks of connections and relations that the reflection on the listening experiences opens up.

This is why Cascella's writing can be said to be fragmentary. It is not only fragmentary in a literal sense – where small chapters and pieces, seemingly without order, interrupt the would-be linearity of reflective writing – but also fragmentary in a Blanchotian sense. In *The Writing of the Disaster* Blanchot describes fragmentary writing as a writing that "even when it is interrupted... carries on". This writing puts itself into question and its temporality is "never certain" but "anterior to all present-past and seemingly posterior to all possibility of any presence to come" (Blanchot, 1986, pp.59-60). In other words, the fragment is what draws writing beyond the shelter of meaning by corresponding to the nature of impossibility. It affirms only a radical futural trace irreducible to presence. Cascella's writing is fragmentary as the very nature of writing about listening necessarily reaches beyond itself, beyond the present, to an outside wholly undetermined. And it is fragmentary as it reflects on a time of listening that is no longer present. Which is why Cascella folds language in on itself, referencing the impossible in a multitude of authors and a multitude of "knots of thoughts and memories and sounds" (Cascella, 2012, p. 131).

An end without end

Like Blanchot, Cascella does not abandon phenomenology altogether. Phenomenology – the preoccupation with experience – is where her work begins

but Cascella quickly passes through phenomenology to a region it cannot contain. She reminds us, like a number of theorists who belong to this anti-ocular turn, of the importance of listening to the understanding of ourselves and the world. Sound opens up a dynamic field of experience that engages the subject in unique and interesting ways. This is why phenomenology seems such a useful way of thinking about listening – as a descriptive first-person methodology we are forced to rethink our staid attitudes by focusing on experience and the interpretation of experience. This is something which Cascella does. But what she also does is very Blanchotian as she does not try to overcome the absence, multiplicity and impossibility inherent in the discussion. She reminds us that a phenomenology of listening must equally be attentive to the disjuncture between sound and writing – based on both memory and abstraction. With this the identity of the listening subject remains possible in a space of impossibility – it is constituted by a multiplicity of meaning and potential that at once makes it possible but also uncertain. What Cascella's work shows us is that the experience of listening is not privileged but rather that the act of writing itself radically alters the experience in question. The phenomenology of listening then, cannot simply be a description of the listening experience but must rupture and fragment against the waves of impossibility that crash against its discourse.

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Musicalists and Lingualists - Michael Bavidge

'To watch Wittgenstein listening to music was to realize that this was something very central and deep in his life...I will never forget the emphasis with which he quoted Schopenhauer's dictum, 'Music is a world in itself.'¹

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Can we model the idea of an *en-music-ed* world on the idea of an enlanguaged world? Or is it just a hyperbolic neologism. Can we make sense of the idea that there could be a tribe of humans that have no language, but live in an en-music-ed world. Let's call them the Musicalists. For this idea to get going it has to involve more than the claim that they do everything to the accompaniment of music; their *Lebenswelt* is shaped through music as closely as our world is shaped by language. Musicalists make sense of the physical and social world through music in a way roughly analogous to the way we make sense of the world through language.

They live alongside another tribe of humans who have language but no music. Having no auditory sense at all, they use sign language. Let's call them the Lingualists. When birthdays come around, the Musicalists hum a tune - it might as well be the tune of 'Happy Birthday to You' - of course without the words; there are no words in their world. The Lingualists, in contrast, sign 'Happy Birthday to You' of course without the tune; there is no *possibility* in their world of setting words to music.

Questioning the coherence of the idea of an en-music-ed world amounts to asking: could we imagine human beings without imagination - not humans without the alleged faculty of the Imagination but people living in a world without aesthetic qualities, i.e. without an enchanted world. There are cave paintings of animals at least 35,000 years old; and statues, we call Venuses, made more than 25,000 years ago. They are evidence that, from earliest times, human beings made art out of life. We cannot hear their music though we can assume they had it. It is particularly appropriate to ask the worldliness question of music if as Walter Pater famously said: 'All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'²

It is important to say, that it would not be possible to translate the Musicalists' musical world and experience into language. Their music makes sense of their world all on its own. They would agree with Felix Mendelssohn - if only they could understand him - when he wrote: 'The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too indefinite to be put into words but on the contrary they are too definite ... The same words never mean the same things to different people. Only the song can say the same thing, can arouse the same feelings in one person as in another, a feeling which is not expressed, however by the same words ...'³

We are already familiar with the thought that music is autonomous. In a letter to a friend Mahler asked a number of philosophical sounding questions 'What is it that thinks in us? And what acts in us? And he comments 'Strange! When I hear music - even when I am conducting - I hear quite specific answers to all my questions - and I am completely clear and certain. Or rather, I feel quite distinctly that they are not questions at all.'

Mahler notices the difference between the everyday world, in which there are questions but no answers, and the musical world, in which there are answers but no questions. He also comments on the dangers of moving between them: 'This strange reality of visions, which instantly dissolve into mist like the things that happen in dreams, is the deepest cause of the life of conflict an artist leads. He is condemned to lead a double life, and woe betide him if it happens that life and dreams flow into one - so that he has appallingly to suffer in the one world for the laws of the other'.⁴

The philosophers in both the Musicalist and Lingualist tribes, i.e. the people who are not satisfied to live quietly side by side, aspire to oversee the two cultures and mediate between them, - well, they suffer appallingly. They suffer in much the same way as our philosophers suffer when, for example, they ask in the philosophical world, 'what is consciousness?' and answer in the neurological world.

Lingualist philosophers think the Musicalists either mean nothing at all (their singing is just a conditioned response) or what they really mean, if they could only know it, is 'Happy Birthday to You'. The Musicalist philosophers, on the other hand, are just wordlessly mystified by the Lingualists' gestures. They think Lingualists either mean nothing at all (their gestures are just a conditioned response) or they feel desperately sorry for them because, though they clearly mark

birthdays, their gestures leave out the soul of the celebration, which is *of course* - at this point in the story, they hum the tune.

It is natural to think of the worldliness of music in terms of its relationship to our feelings. Language informs the world; music informs our feelings. There is not much harm in this provided we think of feelings as also ways of taking the world - music opens up new ways of experiencing the world. Music does not get its meaning through expressing feelings; it is the other way round: our feelings acquire their significance by our living in an en-music-ed world. At a Ceilidh, at a Rave, or, for that matter, in a Viennese ballroom, if we are really enjoying ourselves, we don't dance to the music, but in the music. You can buy a CD of Benedictine Monks chanting *Lux et Origo* and listen to it as a tourist. But in the medieval world, Gregorian chant is not religious yearning set to music; it is religious yearning.

We need not become too precious: en-worlding music does not have to be highbrow, spiritual or ecstatic; as Amanda says in Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, 'Extraordinary how potent cheap music is'.

1 Fann, K.T., ed, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*, Harvester, 1967. pp. 67-68.

2 Pater, W., 'The School of Giorgioni (*Fortnightly Review*, 1877), 3rd ed., 1888.

3 Leon Treitler 'Language and the Interpretation of Music' in Robinson, J., *Music and Meaning*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1997, pp. 26-27

4 Fischer, Jens Malte, *Gustav Mahler*, trans. Stewart Spencer, Yale University Press, 2013 p. 606.

Epistemology after Roy Harris - Zenon Stavrinides

After Epistemology, Paperback: vi + 187 pp, Publisher: Brightpen, Gamlingay (2009), ISBN: 978 07552 1180 7

The death of Roy Harris in February 2015 may well result in a renewed interest in and re-appraisal of the large and controversial body of work he produced during the period when he was Professor of General Linguistics in the University of Oxford and subsequently as Professor Emeritus. His death prompted me to re-read and re-appraise one of his many books, *After Epistemology*, which fell into my hands soon after it was published in 2009, and which at the time I did not know what to make of. I had long maintained a special interest in the field of epistemology – under its ‘established’ conception as the examination of the nature, acquisition and scope of human knowledge – and when I read the book I could not tell what, if anything, it had to say about the range of problems standardly regarded as central in this field. Recently I thought a new attempt to read and understand the book could provide me with some insights which had evaded me the first time around.

In his Preface to the book Harris states his intention “to explore ways of changing our understanding of knowledge”. The main body of the book is divided into two parts: Part I, ‘Epistemology in the Western Tradition’ and Part II, ‘Integrating Knowledge’.

Part I consists for the most part in a critical discussion of what Harris calls ‘the classical model of language’, according to which each word has its very own meaning, which in some versions of the theory is a thing that exists in the external world and in other versions an idea or concept in the mind. The classical model is associated with a certain view of linguistic communication according to which communication between two persons A and B consists in two stages: first, A forms a thought and ‘putting it to words’ – where each word is paired with a meaning – and utters a sentence in English or French or any other language which encodes a thought; and second, B (who knows the language) decodes the sentence and grasps the thought. Harris uses the term ‘telementation’ for the (alleged) transfer of thought from one mind to another through the use of an independently existing or

autonomous language which is common and accessible to speaker and hearer. “The epistemological implication of such claims is clear enough: we can *know* what someone else is thinking on the basis of *knowing* the meanings of the words they use, which in turn is based on our *knowledge* of the language they speak” (p. 14).

Harris attempts to undermine the classical model of language and its implications through a succession of chapters, each providing a critical, and in some cases a hostile, treatment of the views of one or more thinkers who espoused the classical model of language, including Plato and Aristotle, Francis Bacon, and the empiricists Locke, Hume and A.J. Ayer. This part of the book culminates in a discussion of Ferdinand de Saussure, who is acknowledged as the earliest thinker to appreciate that the words speakers use to say something do not always or typically function as names, and that it is quite wrong to suppose that each word ‘corresponds’ to a particular thing or type of thing, independently of the context and purpose of the utterance.

Part I of the book ends with a chapter entitled ‘Beyond Saussure’ in which Harris provides a brief introduction to *integrationism*, which is a certain approach to linguistics which he has helped develop and which he recommends. The integrational approach rejects the notions of telementation and replaces the classical model by the following two theoretical axioms: (1) What constitutes a sign is not given independently of the situation in which it occurs or of its material manifestation in that situation. (2) The value of a sign (i.e. its signification) is a function of the integrational proficiency which its identification and interpretation presuppose (p. 73).

The notion of integration, as it applies to the study of signs and their meanings, is not immediately clear. ‘Integration’ suggests the bringing together into a coherent and structured whole a set of diverse elements – but, it may be asked, what are these elements and what constitutes this bringing together? At this point the reader of *After Epistemology* may seek clarification from another work by Harris, his essay ‘Integrationism: A Very Brief Introduction’, which offers a clearer explanation of his fundamental idea. He writes: “The term *integrational* alludes to the recognition that the linguistic sign alone cannot function as the basis of an independent, self-sufficient form of communication, but depends for effectiveness on its integration with non-verbal activities of many different kinds. These include all those [activities] that do not depend in any way on being able to speak or write; i.e. most of the basic activities needed for everyday living (eating, drinking, bodily movement, standing up, lying down, walking, fetching and carrying, avoiding

obstacles, using elementary tools, paying attention to objects and happenings in the immediate environment, etc.). This ubiquitous prelinguistic substrate of behaviour is a prerequisite for the emergence and maintenance of verbal communication in all its forms” (section 1g).

(http://www.royharrisonline.com/integrational_linguistics/integrationism_introduction.html)

This remark seems to say that a sign, or better, the use of a sign on a particular occasion, takes its meaning or communicative content from its connection to the non-verbal activities which speaker and hearer jointly engage in. If this interpretation is correct, integrational linguistics bears certain similarities to Wittgenstein’s ideas about the way the uses of words are woven into the fabric of various human activities or ‘forms of life’

To return to the book, Harris argues that “All that A and B need to know for the purposes of communication is how to integrate their own semiological activities with those of their interlocutor (e.g. in such matters as paying attention, making eye contact, answering questions, complying with requests, responding to greetings both verbal and non-verbal, laughing at jokes, etc)... Failure of communication is simply failure to engage in the relevant integrational activity at the appropriate time and place. But there is no overarching system to which these diverse patterns of integration have to conform” (p. 75). How do A and B know the appropriate integrational activities to engage in? This is knowledge that comes from the experience of the activities themselves. “We acquire integrational proficiency in our dealings with others as a condition of participating as fully active members of society” (p. 76).

How do the insights of integrational linguistics bear on our understanding of knowledge? Harris makes the point that what people know is revealed by what they do and say. He writes that “knowledge is a form of creative activity. This involves being able to integrate past, present and future experience in a productive programme directed towards a goal” (p. 89) . Further, “knowledge is intrinsically goal-directed and commonly involves interaction with others pursuing related goals” (p. 89). Our author goes on to say that the integrationist approach to knowledge could be regarded as a version of *reliabilism*, i.e. the philosophical theory that knowledge is belief formed by procedures found to be reliable in the past. On this view *knowing how* to do something is more fundamental than *knowing that* something is the case. Truth enters the picture only if success or failure in our programmes of goal-directed knowledge depend on it. We have to

live in the here-and-now, and this forms the intrinsic context knowledge. What we know, Harris says, may be revised in the light of new discoveries or developments in future, but we can't wait for humanity's best judgment.

All this appears at once familiar and also controversial. They are reminiscent of the American pragmatist tradition with its emphasis on knowledge as inquiry, fallibilism, the practical consequences of holding a belief and so on. However, many philosophers think that the uncertainties of scientific theory and speculation presuppose a base of certainty. Isn't there a species of knowledge which is certain and indubitable, in that it consists in one's sensory contact with objects in one's environment? In Harris's view, saying 'I see a birch tree' goes beyond sense perception, since such knowledge begins by *identifying* what is seen, and this involves *interpretation*. This in turn involves integrating present visual experience with past visual experience and (mysteriously) future experience. This last point seems particularly obscure, if only because integrating words into non-verbal activities is different from integrating present and past and future visual data, and Harris does not provide any explanation of the psychological mechanism of sensory integration. When I look for my car in a parking lot and in due course I identify it, my memory of what my car looks like – its shape and colour, together with the number plate – comes into play; but this is not all, since my understanding of what a car is, and my belief that the red car at the far end of the parking lot is *my car*, involve the application of prior knowledge of the *function* of cars in general and the *workings* of this particular vehicle.

This consideration in no way justifies the claim that my identification of my car is a matter of 'integrating' present and past visual data brought under an interpretation which is by its very nature uncertain. If we choose certain other examples, it becomes even more difficult to find Harris's position remotely plausible. When I see my friend, am I supposed to be making a risky interpretation of what I see? When I hear a tune which is very familiar to me and I identify it as '*Auld Lang Syne*', *am I interpreting something in the nature of auditory experiences?*

Harris proceeds to argue that philosophers often reduce knowledge (said to be a creative activity) to information (an abstract reification of what is known). Conflating knowledge with information begins with writing, the systematic record-keeping and expansion of archives, and data in a computer memory. "Information is the static, inert residue to which knowledge dwindles when subjected to persistent and systematic reification" (p. 116). When I know something, I can

proceed with any of a number of relevant activities, which might include telling someone about what I know. If I tell someone what I know, I convert knowledge into information. “That conversion requires a process of communication. Information, unlike knowledge, is always second-hand or third hand or umpteenth-hand. It is available in principle to as many people as are linked in any particular chain of communication. Knowledge, on the other hand, belongs to the individual or individuals personally engaged in its creation” (p. 143). Our author seems to regard knowledge as not just a creative activity, but a *mental* activity. But what are the distinctive characteristics of this activity? It can’t be simply a psychological event or state like a dull pain which a person may find it impossible to describe accurately. If I know something, I know *something*, and normally I am able to say what this is, e.g. the birch tree in my garden is taller than the rose bush. The propositional content of an instance of knowledge enters into the character of this knowledge and distinguishes it from other instances of knowledge. If you and I go on the website of National Train Enquiries, and you find that the first train to London leaves at 6 am and I find that the last train to London leaves at midnight, we get to know different things; if you and I find that there is a fast train at 2 pm, we get to know the same thing. We can transmit the different things we know to others, and this *may* be said to be information. The person to whom we provide information to may be said, equally well, to have received information from us, or to have got to know certain train times, just as you and I had acquired knowledge or information from the internet. To elevate knowledge above information on the sole grounds that the former involves a creative act and the latter is abstract and second-hand is to put forward a spurious philosophical thesis.

What, if anything, is novel and interesting in Harris’s *After Epistemology*? One thing that strikes me as novel is the project of attempting to apply the recently developed discipline of integrational linguistics to epistemology. Among the consequences of this view is that the words ‘knowledge’, ‘know’ and their cognates don’t have a single meaning each – they do not signify a single concept with a single set of conditions for its application – but they are put to different uses in different acts of communication, e.g. to make inquiries, to inform, to acknowledge the validity of an information source. This is a consequence which Harris fails to draw explicitly. On the contrary, he says in so many words that ‘knowledge’ signifies a creative activity, or possibly a type of mental activity comprising a range of sub-types, without explaining the import of the adjective ‘creative’. It may be observed that this adjective generally carries an implication of commendation, in contrast to ‘routine’ and ‘nothing of special value’ (e.g. a writer with a creative talent in contradistinction to a hack who writes to order). A creative *activity* takes a stretch of time and an inquiry or period of research may result in a discovery that counts as a contribution to knowledge. But if I see my neighbour and acknowledge him, what is the sense of claiming to be performing a creative activity? If my neighbour gives me a sour look and I interpret it as an expression of

displeasure at the fact that I tend to park my car in front of his garden gate, then perhaps my *interpretation* has something creative about it. But even here, it makes poor sense to suggest that my interpretation of what I see consists in the creative activity of integrating present and past (let alone future) visual experiences.

In conclusion, Harris may help persuade philosophers that epistemological inquiry is best carried out without the assumption that 'knowledge' signifies a single concept, but on the contrary concentrates on the study of the uses of this word and its cognates in integrative relationship to human activities involved in acts of communication. But there is still the problem of explaining what is involved in a situation where A has correctly identified the species of a tree and replied to B's inquiry that it is a birch tree, by contrast to another situation when A has mistaken an eucalyptus tree for a birch tree and so gave false information to his interlocutor. In the former situation A knows something, in the latter he does not know what he thinks he does. The question of how we get to know things by using our senses and relying on oral and written testimony is hardly touched upon in Harris's book.

Self and Other - Dan Zahavi, Oxford University Press, 2014

Review by Alan Brown

Zahavi's book sets out to address knotty questions about the nature of the self and self-knowledge and their relationship to sociality, or inter-subjectivity, and knowledge of others. His work draws on the tradition of Phenomenology, bringing the thinking of Husserl, Merleau Ponty and other 'Continental' into engagement with debates about self and inter-subjectivity as they emerge in the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy and empirical psychology, cognitive science and neuropsychology.

Unsurprisingly, Zahavi encounters at every step ambiguities in the definition of the fundamental concepts that articulate the terrain - those of experience, consciousness, self, empathy and so on. And the enervating feeling that seemingly every possible stance on these questions has a philosopher representing it, is never more apparent than here. Zahavi's discussion is far reaching and sophisticated. But for a reasonably advanced reader it is a clear and coherent elaboration of a position according to which the self is real (not illusory or a 'social construction') and intrinsic to - though not an object of - the phenomenology of first-order subjective experience as such (not an achievement of reflective second-order cognition about experience). Nevertheless, the self so conceived does not, on his view, inevitably make inter-subjectivity and knowledge of others problematic, as is often supposed ('if the self is subjective and experiential, does that not cut us off from other selves?'). Indeed, Zahavi aims to show how an insistence on the 'egological' account of the self, as real and essentially first-personal, far from threatening scepticism about others, is rather a prerequisite for a satisfactory account of inter-subjectivity.

Key to Zahavi's thesis is a proper account of empathy, a concept the theoretical manifestations of which seem to have been strikingly multifarious. Zahavi provides a fascinating survey of the origin of the concept in debates about the self and other minds, and its influence on recent debates about 'theory of mind', an influential stream of philosophical and empirical research into understanding the conceptual framework which underpins inter-subjectivity and social cognition:

“Is empathy a question of sharing another’s feelings, or caring about another, or being emotionally affected by another’s experiences though not necessarily experiencing the same experiences?” (p.101).

“...[H]ow is it related to and different from emotional contagion, motor mimicry, emotional sharing, imaginative projection, perspective taking, empathic distress and empathic concern?” (p.101).

Translated from the term ‘Einfühlung’, initially used in the context of aesthetics by Robert Vischer, it was appropriated for the study of social cognition by Theodore Lipps in explaining the basic capacity for understanding others as ‘minded’. The origin in aesthetics is instructive, if worrying. There, the thought was, when one experiences nature as animated, one is projecting part of oneself into external objects, investing them imaginatively with a significance that belongs properly only to minded creatures. Lipps thought that empathy in social cognition was also a matter of projecting oneself into an external object which, perceptually speaking, is ‘psychologically meaningless’ - a configuration of ‘colourless bodily movements’ (as the psychologist C. L. Hull once put it). Lipps rejected the traditional argument from analogy (according to which one recognises a relation between one’s own mental life and its bodily and physical causes and effects then infers by analogy the occurrence of others’ mental lives when presented with like physical and bodily causes and effects (when a flame approaches another’s body and the body writhes for example)). But he still regarded the mental as essentially experienced from the first person subjective point of view and, though he acknowledged that appropriate bodily expressions were more intimately related to the mental itself than, for example, smoke is related to fire as a sign or manifestation of it, he nevertheless saw bodily behaviour as ultimately psychologically meaningless. He rooted social cognition in instincts to imitate and to express:

“[W]hen I see a joyful face, I will reproduce the expression of joy, this will evoke a feeling of joy in me, and this felt joy, which is co-given with the currently perceived facial expression, will then be attributed to the other, thereby allowing for a form of interpersonal understanding” (Lipps, quoted in Zahavi, p.105).

It is not hard for anyone versed in the more recent philosophical and psychological literature on ‘Theory of Mind’ to notice that something very similar to this view is present in the so-called Simulationist theories of social cognition (for example in the work of Robert Gordon), and in appeals, in the neuroscience of social cognition, to ‘mirror neurons’, ‘emotional contagion’ and ‘motor mimicry’.

Zahavi's critique of this early conception of empathy draws on Phenomenology and its analysis of empathy as a "distinct other-directed form of intentionality" (xiii) which allows 'other-mindedness' to be given, non-inferentially, in perception. The discussion addresses just how 'direct' access to other minds is, consistent with maintaining a distinction between first and third-person 'access' to the mental, and the relationship of phenomenological accounts to modern philosophical and empirical theories. The book is not easy but I doubt anyone would do a better job than Zahavi of presenting the Phenomenologists in this aspect to the non-specialist.

Letter to the Editor

Reply to Norman Bacrac

Dear Editor

In the Spring 2015 issue, I was pleased to see that religious debate is still alive, and was particularly interested in Norman Bacrac's refutation of William Craig. Craig goes through the deep questions unanswered by science, such as what is consciousness, how did the Universe begin, or why is it fine tuned; and places God in these gaps. Norman's refutation either gives a natural explanation for a gap or claims that no explanation is necessary. My view is that Craig is a bit hasty in putting God in the gaps, but Bacrac's refutations are not wholly convincing.

To give examples, I will comment on three of the eight reasons given by Craig and refuted by Bacrac.

Reason 1.

Craig: God is the best explanation why anything at all exists, because anything that exists, including the universe, needs an explanation.

Bacrac: Some events in the sub-atomic world are without explanation, so it may be that the universe as a whole does not have an explanation. (I assume Bacrac means what he says here, and not the more modest claim that we cannot know the explanation. Also, I understand that WE give an explanation of an event, which is in the form of a reason, and for physical events the reason is a cause)

Comment. The spontaneous events in the sub-atomic world average out on a larger scale of objects, with the result that the events we experience have explanations. If a computer materialised on my desk without cause I would be surprised. The universe is larger than my computer, and any spontaneous events at its start should have averaged out even further. Bacrac proposes that because the smallest events can occur without explanation the largest event could have happened without one, in spite of the fact that everything in between happens for reasons. This is not a strong argument.

The above argument assumes that the laws of physics are already in place waiting for the first event. If, on the other hand, we assume that physics started with the start of the universe, we can have no knowledge about this; so arguments based on current events are irrelevant, whether Bacrac's or my own, and this irrelevance holds for the discussion about when physics started.

No explanation means not just **that** the universe started with no explanation, but also **when**. If we postulate that it may have started just before the big bang, because it was then in its simplest state, that is attempting to explain when. With no explanation, it could have started somewhere in a previous contraction before the big bang, or could have started last Tuesday with a virtual past. Also we should be worried that any time the universe could end, because what starts for no reason can stop without a reason. The no-explanation explanation is not that simple.

Reason 4

Craig: *God is the best explanation for the fine tuning of the universe for intelligent life.* (The Goldilocks phenomenon)

Bacrac *The multiverse addresses this issue.*

Comment. This phenomenon has been recently discovered by cosmologists. They find that it is improbable that after the big bang certain physical constants happened to be just right for our stable universe; and they invented a solution—the multiverse, in which other universes exist with different values of physical constants. We just happen to be in the one that worked for us. Proponents differ on the nature of the multiverse, but (surprisingly) they are serious about its existence. Others are critical because:--

1 We cannot explore another universe, so the theories cannot be verified. If the possibility of verification is ruled out by the nature of a theory, it is normally ruled out as a scientific explanation. Theories of this type which account for known facts but do not have the possibility of verification may have a value, but we then have a problem in deciding what status to give them. If we extend science to allow them, this could extend our range of knowledge, but how do we limit what is allowed? If we allow Bacrac the Multiverse, why not open the door a bit wider and allow Craig God?

2 We cannot have a theory about the multiverse. Whatever is true in our universe is untrue in the others, including our theory that they exist.

Maybe acceptance of the Goldilocks effect in our one universe is the simpler explanation.

Reason 10

Bacrac discusses Free Will which is a topic he says Graig has not raised but should have. He goes on to give a biological explanation on how we make decisions. The

physicalist account of who we are is a respected philosophical position, but not the only one. We in the North East Group have been studying “The Spirit of the World” by Roger Scruton, where he argues that our personal language is an alternative and often better explanation of who we are. Bacrac, instead of solving the free will problem with biology, has merely joined a philosophical debate.

We could comment on more of the responses, but these are sufficient to show that Bacrac’s refutations are more complex than claimed, and if we cannot accept Craig’s certainties, then deep questions about us and the world remain unanswered. We have no choice but to live and die without knowing why we, or in fact the whole universe, are here.

I am not a cosmologist, or for that matter a philosopher, so some of the above could be simply mistaken. It has been fun thinking about it, and I hope it contributes to the debate.

John Griffith.

Local News

The Northern Group has two branches, one in Newcastle where it meets at Jesmond Library, the other 40 miles north in Alnwick. In both places we have benefited from community enterprises.

In 2013, Newcastle City Council decided to close Jesmond Library - a victim of cuts in public spending, after providing a service to the public for fifty years. A group of local residents re-opened the library on a volunteer basis, as a limited company and registered charity. They have developed the library into a community hub. We are able to use its building with its circular reading room, designed by Henry Faulkner Brown, and officially listed as being of special architectural interest.

In 1991 Mary and Stuart Manley decided to set up a second-hand bookstore, Barter Books, in the old railway station in Alnwick. Alongside their business project they intended that the lovingly restored building should contribute to the social and cultural life of the town. It has been a tremendous success and our group has benefited from their generosity. We meet there on the second Thursday of each month. In the winter months we walk beneath the overhead model railway and past the 40-foot murals, through the vast space lined with glass cases of antiquarian books, and gather round the open fire in what was the station's waiting room.

So philosophy has benefited from local volunteers determined that cuts in public services should not impoverish community life, and from business people who see no conflict between setting up a successful enterprise and supporting their community. Why not visit their websites and drop in if you are passing - they are well worth a visit.



Figure 1 <http://jesmondlibrary.co.uk/>



Figure 2 <http://www.barterbooks.co.uk/>