

How to Get Out of Your Head: Notes Toward a Philosophy of Mixed Bodies.

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These are some things I have been meaning, for some time I now see, to try to say. I intend them to constitute a mild but, I hope emphatic protest against the imperialism of spirit. Not the spirit of imperialism, which may be regarded as a subsidiary form of the imperialism of spirit, but rather the rage to increase and secure the reach and prestige of the sovereign subject. The imperialism of spirit takes many forms and goes under many names, and of course I recognise that life cannot possibly be long enough for me or anyone, to see them all off; the politics of identity; the realm of desire; life; art; and the infinite extension of knowledge. All of them can conveniently be subsumed under the rubric of what Hegel called the phenomenology of spirit. This is almost tautological, since subsuming is in fact the most important and characteristic thing that spirit does. The word 'subsume' literally means to take under, to take something up completely into something else: though one necessarily stoops to subsume something, one elevates oneself in that demeaning-domineering stoop. Romanticism was particularly keen on motions of subsuming. Subsuming means a taking in, an incorporation, a digestion. Hegel's prospect was of a spirit that would come into being through its struggle with the attempts of the world to resist being subsumed. Spirit is envy of anything that is not itself, appropriative rage. Spirit is properly imperialistic, for it can only exist in the condition of expansion, forming itself from this action of temporarily deforming incorporation, like the anaconda dislocating its jaws to encompass the inconceivable warthog. Eventually, we must presume, the whole hog of the world will have been digested leaving spirit its victorious satiety. That the consummation promised in the surviving varieties of 'sumption' could be anything other than devoutly to be wished is not to be thought of. What a telling pity that privative words formed from *sumere* do not seem to have stayed the course: to *desume*, meaning to extract, derive or take away, and to *forsume*, for which the OED gives only a solitary citation, Gavin Douglas's *King Hart* of 1510, where the word seems to mean to waste, as in wasting time. –Sumption, it seems, has forgotten how to be unassuming.

The imperialism of spirit aims then to evaporate matter into spirit, nature into knowing. The unthinking is to be brought into, to be made over into thought. The most pervasive contemporary form of the imperialism of spirit is to be found in the spiritualising of information. Take, for example, the 'Noosphere' website, a wikipedia-type project which aims at increasing the level of global awareness through internet connectivity. We read that

The Noosphere is an image that describes the consciousness of people who are aware --at the highest possible level-- of the sense of life and existence, and of their vocation and active role within this process. An essential characteristic of this Noosphere is that the people who are part of it communicate with each other --by several means, but nowadays mostly by Internet--, thus enhancing each other's consciousness about this fundamental information, and strengthening their sense of responsibility [sic] and active involvement in the global evolutionary process. [<http://noosphere.cc/noospheresociety.html> accessed 27 December 2005]

Now, this all seems unexceptionable, does it not? Leaving aside one's qualms, diverting though it would be to dwell on them, about the confidence in 'global evolutionary process', who could doubt the wisdom and desirability of enhancing awareness and consciousness? The cultivation of consciousness is regarded, not just as a human speciality, but as a kind of responsibility or white-man's burden we owe to insentient things. All that desperate work of squirming and swarming, ravening and parturition was, it seems, just the prelude to the arrival of man, whose role is to perfect nature by making it conscious of itself. The most important figure here is the mystical Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, who originated the conception of the 'noosphere', identified by many with the internet, which he saw as the way to embody the essence of man, which is consciousness: 'Man discovers that he is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself. The consciousness of each of us is evolution looking at itself and reflecting upon itself' (Chardin 1975, 221).

Human beings just adore their consciousness (or the thought of it). They can neither get enough of it, or imagine what it could be like not to have it. They assume there is nothing higher or more desirable than consciousness, or anything lower and more terrifying than insentience, animal, vegetable, or mineral. This is why all the various assaults on the sovereignty of the subject have taken the form of a kind of self-help, a recommendation for a different kind or quality of subject, more yielding, more permeable, but, in the process, more assimilating than ever. Opening to 'the other' is an opulent, optimising move in extending the jurisdiction of spirit.

Speaking and thinking about 'consciousness' encourages the assumption that it can exist in a pure or self-referential state: indeed, that its mission is to attain to this pure state. But is this coherent? Who has ever in fact experienced awareness, in itself and as such, without it being awareness of something? One can never be simply aware of the act or fact of being aware; one can only be aware indirectly, through being aware of something.

Awareness is in fact interest, attention, absorption: being taken up in the world. The central paradox of consciousness is that it is unconscious of itself, except at moments when it is ceasing to be conscious of something else, which is to say, when it is ceasing to be, or suspending itself. Human beings have a deep, narcissistic attachment to the act of thinking, which they sometimes think of as 'pure consciousness'. They think that thinking about something gives it the power of being thought about – even, by proxy, the power of thinking itself. The notion of pure consciousness is a foolish phantasm. For consciousness can never be pure: it can only ever consist in an act of being drawn aside from yourself. Attention is distraction. People say 'pay attention' to mean 'come to attention', be present in yourself. But coming to attention means losing yourself and only that.

Satan tempted Christ with the prospect of the land that lay all before him (one day, my boy, all this will be yours). The halfway-wise soul contemplates such spreading immensity not with hunger, but with a voluptuous, relieved satisfaction at the impossibility of biting off, or keeping down, immensity like that, satisfaction that so much world lies beyond his exertions and appetite. I favour high places with such prospects because I breathe easy in the defeat they so prolifically disclose. The steeper the gradient, the higher the ground, the greater the relief from the burden of self, the thinner the air, the greater the expense of spirit, and the possibility of putting off spirit's delirium.

Some years ago I pretended to invent a form of critical writing I called 'cultural phenomenology'. No doubt I was obeying rather than initiating a shift in opinion, a softening towards the tradition of phenomenology, which had previously endured sough rough treatment at the hands of the post-structuralists who had moved into town and for so long and so crookedly run the saloon, bordello and hardware store. But now it seems that, where the word 'phenomenology' had been, for about three decades, a form of philosophical curse, fewer and fewer people nowadays have a bad word to say about it. But what people mean by phenomenology is a new permission given to 'experience', or to talk of it.

This is something of a relief and certainly not a bad thing in itself. But it is not what interests me most in phenomenology, or strikes me as the most interestingly unfulfilled of the many unfulfilled things about the phenomenological enterprise. For me, that is the possibility it holds out of paying attention to new things, and paying attention to old things in new ways, including to the act of paying attention. For the most important insight or impetus given by phenomenology is the doctrine of intentionality

Intention comes from Latin ‘intendere’, the primary meaning of which seems to be to draw a bow, thereby directing oneself at a target. In philosophical usage, particularly that of the medieval Scholastics, ‘intentionality’ has this meaning of ‘directedness’, rather than ‘purposiveness’. Intentionality is the condition of having an aim or object, not meaning to do something. So the ‘-in’ prefix at the beginning of the term ‘intentionality’ does not indicate a movement of the mind inwards on itself, or even a movement outwards from some inner condition, but rather a movement ‘into’ something else. An ‘intention’ in this sense is like an ‘inquiry’ or an ‘inquest’ – a going into some matter or other. The ‘in’ has something of the same ghost motion about it as the motion-towards of the Latin ‘ad’, thus making intention closely equivalent to ‘attention’ (to attend is to ‘ad-tend’, to bend, tend or strain towards). That the word intention is often misunderstood is due to the fact that, in ordinary usage, it has come to mean something like the opposite of this. To be ‘intense’ is to be powerfully concentrated or coiled in on oneself – to be focussed, with the idea of convergent lines that metaphor embodies. An intensive course is one which condenses a great deal of material in a short space of time (while an extensive course is one that is wide-ranging and spread out over time). To *be intent on* something mingles the medieval and modern takings of the term: the ‘on’ being required to turn the otherwise inward-facing intensity outwards on to its object. When Ted Hughes wanted a word to signify an act of attention in an animal that could not be assumed to have much in the way of conscious, self-monitoring intention, he had to revive an obsolete word: ‘the attent, sleek thrushes on the lawn’ (Hughes 2003, 82). Most likely, the movement from intentionality-as-directedness to intentionality-as-purposiveness is assisted by this inward turn in the notion of intention. Perhaps having a purpose is thought of as being inwardly concentrated on one’s exterior goal – it is a species of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. The things towards which the mind is directed are paradoxically both in the mind and outside them.

The revival of the principle of intentionality is one of the distinctive founding moves made by the philosophers who became known as phenomenologists. Franz Brentano is usually credited with being the first modern philosopher to maintain, in his *Psychology From An Empirical Standpoint* (1874), that all mental acts are intentional, that is, they are all ‘about’ something, that they all have objects. There can be no pure thought, only thought about things:

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be

understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on. (Brentano 1995, 88-9)

The principle of intentionality is even more emphatically sustained by Edmund Husserl, the first great systematic phenomenologist:

We understand under Intentionality the unique peculiarity of experiences “to be the consciousness *of* something”. It was in the explicit *cogito* that we first came across this wonderful property to which all metaphysical enigmas and riddles of the theoretical reason lead us eventually back: perceiving is the perceiving of something, maybe a thing; judging, the judging of a certain matter; valuation, the valuing of a value; wish, the wish for a content wished, and so on. Acting concerns action, doing concerns the deed, loving the beloved, joy the object of joy. In every wakeful cogito, a “glancing” ray from the pure Ego is directed upon the “object” of the correlate of consciousness for the time being, the thing, the fact, and so forth, and enjoys the typically varied consciousness of it.... (Husserl 1931, 242-3)

Large claims have occasionally been made for the importance of the principle of intentionality as maintained in phenomenology. Robert Sokolowski sees it as determining the way in which phenomenology has ‘broken out of the egocentric predicament...checkmated the Cartesian doctrine’. It is because of its adherence to the intentionality principle that phenomenology

shows that the mind is a public thing, that it acts and manifests itself out in the open, not just inside its own confines. Everything is outside. The very notions of an “intramental world” and an “extramental world” are incoherent; they are examples of what Ezra Pound called “idea-clots.” The mind and the world are correlated with one another. (Sokolowski 2000, 12)

Where, however, is this correlation supposed to take place? Brentano is clear about this: “This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves’ (Brentano 1995, 89). Similarly, Husserl, having affirmed the principle of

intentionality, or, in the terms he invented, the indivisibility of the noetic and the noematic components of any act of mind, he then sees it off, via his famous ‘reduction’. According to this principle of reduction or bracketing, we are supposed to set aside the question of what kind of existence the objects of thought might have apart from in the mind, in favour of a scrutiny of acts of mind alone. When we change our natural attitude towards the world into a phenomenological one, explain Seppo Sajama and Matti Kamppinen, ‘our awareness is not directed any more to external things, but to our own experiences’ (Sajama and Kamppinen 1987, 91).

Hence the glum fact that the very philosophy that might have opened up a way of understanding the necessary directedness of minds to the worlds of which they take cognizance gets a well-deserved reputation for a maundering immersion in the ways of the mind, sustained by a dubious faith in its givenness to itself through introspection – all of which makes it a fish-in-a-barrel target for its critics and objectors. The advantage of the phenomenological reduction, for those who turn out not to be interested in intentionality at all, is that it enables intentions to be thought of, not as issuings or aimings or orientations of the mind, but as contents of it. This accounts for the two great sterile preoccupations of the philosophy of intention: the problem of referring to non-existent objects (sooner or later, it seems, every philosophical discussion of intentionality will start having headaches about what exactly is going on when one thinks about unicorns), and the problem of referring to one and the same object in different ways (how do we then know that we are talking about the same thing?) (Sajama and Kamppinen 1987, 42). Both of these leave aside the intention, the aiming, the orientation, in favour of the familiar problem of determining whether and what things really exist, and if so, where (in the world? in our minds? the mind of God?)

Nearly all philosophical discussions of intentionality rapidly leave behind the sense of tending towards, of aiming (even of straining), that is there in the word ‘intendere’, and get caught up in the problem of precisely what it means to have a picture of something in one’s mind – especially if that picture is of something which does not exist in the world. Owning a picture is very different from aiming at an object. The effect is to transport us from the firing range to the picture gallery. In doing so, philosophers start to concern themselves with difficulties relating to the nature of mind, rather than with the complex, composite act of being directed or orientated towards something. Orientation requires you to be in a particular embodied condition, at a particular distance from and angle to the things to which you are attending. In this, you will, like all human beings, be biased by your neurological arrangement – by whether you are left-handed or right handed, for example (in which latter case, even if you think of looking *directly* at

something, you will be doing so with a right-handed squint, with all the force of *Dieu et mon droit*). By contrast, the concern with the contents and capacities of the mind is more easily addressed to an abstract, average mind, to an any-mind-at-all, or never-mind-what-mind.

The theory of intentionality ought to make it uninteresting for us to think and act otherwise than as though things existed outside the mind, because there *would be nothing in the mind but its aimings at things beyond it*. ‘The mind’, as fabulous as the herds of unicorns it harbours, would appear in nothing but its excursions and curiosities and exorbitances. If human beings have the most highly-wrought consciousness that we know of on this planet, this is to say that we are the least, not the most highly present to ourselves in our consciousness. We consist of our ecstatic, extravagant evacuations of ourselves: the more conscious you are, the less you can exist as pure or abstract ‘consciousness’. As Michel Serres asserts, ‘[t]he more I think, the less I am: the more I am I, the less I think and act’ (Serres 1999, 12). Developing consciousness to the highest point, through meditation, argument, experiment, practice, education, does not mean cramming your mind with contents, two by two: it means, as the culture of intoxication has it, getting out of your head. An empty mind would be one that contained no ways out, no possibilities of vocation or vacation. What is more, on those special occasions, like now, when we take the mind and its operations as our objects, we are only finding another way to take leave of ourselves, toward the world. So that whatever is thought to be ‘in’ the mind, in the form of images, is really in the world. To say that somebody is wrapped up in themselves tells us nothing about the nature of their experience; for it is possible to be absorbed in mental conceptions (calculations, religious meditations) in a way that is precisely equivalent to the absorption in physical tasks. Becoming addicted to the work of thought is no different, from the point of view of a properly-maintained theory of intentionality, from the passionate cultivation of snooker, origami, beekeeping or needlework.. It is not for nothing that we call such things occupations.

For too long, we have thought of education as the work of constituting the mind in its relation to itself. We imagine that we come into the world as animals, who have no secure way of distinguishing their perceptions from what they perceive, and therefore no secure boundary between self and world, and no way to wall off their interiority. We think of the work of education as building this immurement brick by brick, in fulfilment of the Delphic precept ‘Nosce te ipsum’. But to know yourself is to develop an intentional relation to yourself, to be able to constitute yourself as part of the world. This big little word ‘world’ signifies the sum total of what we are able to intend or attend to. As human beings we hunger for world, for the world. We are, as Heidegger might have said, ‘weltlich’, at once worldly,

worlding and worldive: we hunger to constitute the world as world, to give the world to itself as something other than ourselves. Not ‘the world is too much with us’, but ‘we are too much with ourselves’. Michael Serres images the ideal condition of what he calls the instructed, but which we might as well call the ‘interested’ soul, the one who is *inter esse*, amid things, as being like the goalkeeper facing a penalty kick, who is, for a calm, exquisite interval of tense equilibrium, equally prepared to move in any direction whatever: they are both point and compass, a star of possibility (Serres 1997, 23).

So, although phenomenologists are owed the credit of reviving the principle of intentionality, we must hope that it might get us somewhere else than where it has got phenomenologists, which is to say in detention, in indefinite abstention, among the twilit velleities of the mind, rather than in extension. The doctrine of intention, like so much else in phenomenology, is a failure that points a way far more effectively than any of phenomenology’s bruited breakthroughs. It’s not that phenomenologists need to worry less about their notion of intentionality, it is that we should give ourselves leave to worry (even) less about their worry.

I want to use the doctrine of intentionality to direct us to the idea of directedness. This should not, I think, lead to naivety, neutrality, or what is usually meant by ‘objectivity’ (coldness, distance, abstraction, etc). Rather, it should be the kind of impassioned emptying – and emptying towards rather than emptying out – that Keats may have had in mind when he coined the phrase ‘negative capability’. What I propose is that one might reduce the principle of philosophical reduction so as to take the principle of intentionality – the principle of the irreducible ‘of-ness’ or ‘aboutness’ of mental acts – as a warrant and incitement to something like a properly philosophical account of the objects of thought.

To attend to the emptyings of the mind towards things in the world, is to add an annex to the ‘philosophy of mixed bodies’ announced by Michel Serres in 1985. An intended object is always a coactive assemblage. To the eye, ear and hand encouraged by the principle of intentionality, there will always be a multiplicity, perhaps an infinity, of possible mixed bodies, each one constituted not just by the projective coincidence of agents and objects (for to aim at something, even to miss it, is always still to meet with it), but also by a temporal manifold of occasions on which mind, hand and matter have met and reciprocally precipitated each other. Thus, I never raise a pen or tennis racket as though for the first time, but rather as part of a shifting sequence of similar occasions. We are never in the presence, never in the present, of an object.

Though we have the reputation of appropriating, or making things our own, through objectification, objects are forms of dispossession. Though they may appear to focus, channel or stabilise our actions and intentions, objects in fact multiply and dissipate them. Viewed closely, all interesting objects are in fact ‘quasi-objects’, a term first defined by Michel Serres, and taken up in the ‘actor-network theory’ developed by Michel Callon in economics, Bruno Latour in science, and John Law in social forms. Quasi-objects agitate the serene distinction between subjects and objects, between actors and the objects on which they are thought to act. Serres’s quasi-object resembles Winnicott’s ‘transitional object’. But, where Winnicott’s model explicates the way in which an individual negotiates its relations to the world, Serres’s model concerns the complex interchanges involved in collectivity. For we never intend alone – all our intentions are contentions. What lies between partners in a dialogue, combatants, or opponents, can be thought of like the mobile objects employed in games: the ball in a game of rugby, the parcel in pass-the-parcel, or the ‘furet’ (‘ferret’), used in a French game resembling hunt-the-slipper. Serres explicates the process whereby the rapid, flyflight itinerary of the puck, ball, shuttlecock, furet, fox, greasy pig, both distinguishes and connects, fixes and dissolves, the parties to the collectivity and their relative positions:

The quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject. He who is not discovered with the furet in his hand is anonymous, part of a monotonous chain where he remains indistinguished. He is not an individual; he is not recognized, discovered, cut; he is of the chain and in the chain. He runs, like the furet, in the collective. The thread in his hands is our simple relation, the absence of the furet; its path makes out indivision. Who are we? Those who pass the furet; those who don’t have it. The quasi-object, when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual. If he is discovered, he is “it” [mort]. Who is the subject, who is an “I,” or who am I? The moving furet weaves the “we,” the collective; if it stops, it marks the “I.” (Serres 1982: 225)

Serres’s concern in this section of *The Parasite* is to use the quasi-object to construct a model of intersubjectivity, or collectivity. Most models of intersubjectivity involve the static configuration of distinguishable nodes and connections: sociality as circuit-board or wiring-diagram. In such models, subjects may interlock with other subjects, or move round positions, like chess-pieces on a board, or other invariant ground. In Serres’s model, what lies between the elements of the system is itself volatile, and the

whole is held together by what agitates it or keeps pulling it apart and back together:

This quasi-object that is a marker of the subject is an astonishing constructor of intersubjectivity. We know, through it, how and when we are subjects and when and how we are no longer subjects. “We”: what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of “I.” The “I” in the game is a token exchanged. And this passing, this network of passes, these vicariances of subjects, weave the collection... The “we” is made by the bursts and occultations of the “I.” The “we” is made by the passing of the “I.” By exchanging the “I.” And by substitution and vicariance of the “I.” (Serres 1982: 227)

But this intersubjectivity is not a mere thickening of the source of individual subjectivity, an intermittency made continuous. For it is brought into being outside itself, it hangs together only as long as it keeps getting passed on, rerouted, undone. In rugby, Serres’s favourite game, at least for the forming of philosophical analogies, one is continuously at risk from being ‘sold a dummy’, where one stops watching the ball, and wrongly guesses its likely movement from the posture or gesture of the player. One is either left oneself in the condition of a dummy, or holding a useless, inert simulacrum of the ball, whose true nature is to be the bearer, the former, the operator of potentials.

Encouraged by such considerations, we propose next term to convene a sequence of encounters under the rubric of the ‘Philosophy of Disregarded Objects’. Each will improvise a scrutiny of a particular object, or quasi-object, neither attempting to determine its nature in itself, nor to unmask the ways in which it is ‘constructed’, by fantasy or ideology, but rather making out the kinds of mixed body to which it gives rise. Here is the list of objects for which we will try to invent forms of attention: meat, dust, batteries, breath, dizziness, accents, hesitation, teeth, walls, and spit. For there is no one approach to or method for attending to such objects – certainly not an approved ‘phenomenological method’, though phenomenology has occasionally sanctioned or provoked different ways for some writers to get into the thoughtful vicinity of objects.

The challenge of constructing these kinds of mixed bodies is that of keeping ourselves sufficiently in abeyance. For, as the archer, sniper, seamstress and high-wire walker know, you can only reach your aim if you keep yourself out of the picture, if you indulge the hair-raising heresy that the world exists, apart from my angry, hungry dream of it. The stripping away of dream, delusion, fantasy from the world has been blamed by many for the alleged

reduction of the world to mere dead objects for our use. But I approve and believe in the disenchantment of the world, which is to say the noble and useful toil of emancipating the world from our phantasmagorias. These phantasmagorias must surely include the dream of overcoming the allegedly arbitrary and violent subject-object dichotomy on which everything from patriarchy to global warming has been blamed. For humans must have objects, must objectify the world for there to be a world. For only amid objects, in the realm of the not-self, of the not-our-own, can thought, discovery, invention, miracle, wonder, *mind*, come about. Without objects, and the possibility of getting out of your head for which they alone will suffice, one is condemned to live, as one mostly still does live, addicted or fixated in needy, greedy, fitful feverings. Only in a world freed from me have I a chance of coming on myself, in the words of Seamus Heaney's 'Tollund Man', 'lost/Unhappy, and at home' (Heaney 1990, 40).

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