Fathoming the Bottomless Lake of Consciousness: The Phenomenological Pragmatism of Robert E. Innis

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This article sympathetically explores the phenomenological pragmatism of Robert E. Innis in *Consciousness and the Play of Forms* and *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense*. Disputing both the realistic view that perception underlies semiosis and deconstructionist reversals of this, Innis claims they are inextricably interwoven. He forges an alliance between pragmatists Peirce and Dewey, and Continental phenomenologists Polanyi, Bühler, and Cassirer, a “polyphony” that also yields a richly aesthetic critique of technology. By restricting his analysis to a methodological “frame,” Innis overlooks a metaphysical tension between Polanyi’s realism and Cassirer’s idealism, though potentially resolvable in Dewey’s transactional philosophy.

1. Introduction

Although the lion’s share of the resurgent pragmatism sparked by Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam a quarter century ago has devoted itself to challenging metaphysical realism, scientific reductionism, and logicism in the dominant analytic tradition, a smaller yet equally vibrant group has explored the connection between pragmatism and phenomenology. The groundbreaking work of Richard Bernstein, James Edie, H. S. Thayer, Joseph Margolis, Jürgen Habermas, and Karl-Otto Apel, has been expanded in recent decades by, among others, Sandra Rosenthal and Patrick Bourgeois, Umberto Eco, John Stuhr, Richard Shusterman, Charles Taylor, and Sami Pihlström.

This meritorious list would be deficient, however, without the inclusion of Robert E. Innis. In numerous essays and two important books, Innis, in equal measure, draws upon the insights of classical pragmatism, especially that of Charles S. Pierce and John Dewey, and an unorthodox yet vital selection of phenomenologists led by Michael Polanyi, Karl Bühler, and Ernest Cassirer.
This essay explores this ingenious liaison as it tackles the seminal problem of the relation between perception and semiosis. With great breadth of scholarship and erudition, Innis shows us that a phenomenology infused with the pragmatic insight that “knowing is doing” is best suited to bring empirical intuition and conceptual forms into a reciprocal or “transactional” unity that avoids either an unbridgeable polarity or the reduction of one to the other.

Innis not only outlines the “formal frame” of the integration of perception and semiosis, but extends this to “exosomatic” constructs that alert us to technology’s capacity for global transformation. Where world and mind interpenetrate is the prospect of an aesthetic and richly human approach to technology that avoids both crude quantitative gauges of utility and utopian ideals that all too often result in demonic oppression.

But though the frame approach has important consequences for aesthetics and technology, Innis avoids tackling the metaphysical and epistemological ramifications of phenomenological pragmatism. Such “deeper” issues lurk just below the surface, however, and in the two concluding sections we’ll examine a possible tension between Polanyi’s realism and Cassirer’s methodological idealism before sketching a reconciliation inspired by Dewey.

2. Perception or Semiosis?

Where Consciousness and the Play of Signs (CPS) focuses upon the formal structure of perception and semiosis as the ground of meaning, self, and objectivity, Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense (PFS) explores the cultural expansion of meaning through its aesthetic and technological exosomatic constructs. But both books are motivated by what might be dubbed, with only slight exaggeration, the enduring problem of Western philosophy. Ever since Parmenides’s critique of the materialists, philosophy has pitted the “giants of earth” against the “lovers of forms.” Protagoras and Plato, medieval nominalists and realists, empiricists and rationalists, realists and idealists, ultimately contest the ontological priority of percepts versus concepts. For the “giants of earth,” by whatever name, perception is structured by the mind-independent world – an elemental “givenness” to some degree resilient to the interpretive and relational functions of the concept. But, counter the “lovers of forms,” if nothing can be thought except through concepts, sheer “givenness” is a chimera that masks the ultimate priority of mind-“givenness” – of the rational or conceptual.

Following Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, twentieth century phenomenologists learned to “bracket” percepts (and other realms of engagement) from a host of entanglements involving the “mind-independent world.” Coordinately, and quite helpfully, the once-detached and eventually beleaguered “mind” now energetically embraced the pervasive milieu of