Language and the Emergence of Meaning


"Probably the chief gain from phenomenology is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

As William James pointed out, it's a rather remarkable if not downright extraordinary fact that "the world plays right into the hands of logic."¹ We are able to think and understand the ordinary empirical order of space and time in terms of fixed and formal laws of the intellect and rationality in general. On the other hand, the empiricist's hardheaded and here-and-now sense that that empirical order of space and time is not simply reducible to those fixed and formal relations and laws of the intellect is equally extraordinary and compelling. On the one hand, we are amazed by the reach and grasp of our minds; on the other, we sense their limits. The horns of this dilemma seem at first sight unavoidable and yet, somehow, philosophically intolerable.

Professor Edie, in this his latest book, heroically attempts to avoid the pernicious dilemma by dissolving it into another, that is a third, perspective which undercuts both. He does all this by means of a rigorous analysis of language. Having shown how certain fundamental issues in language theory have led either to idealistic and formal philosophies of language or to empirical ones, he then tries to show that in fact both views presuppose and depend upon a third,

¹ William James, The Principles of Psychology; quoted by Edie, p. 19. Page references to the text in what follows placed in parentheses.
phenomenological perspective which begins to make some consistent sense out of the phenomenon of language. The central purpose of this book, then, is to outline a phenomenological approach to language. I think Professor Edie is largely successful at that task, as I hope to show in what follows. At the same time, the view he develops gets us beyond the idealism/empiricism dichotomy in the philosophy of language by helping us to see the "truth" that each contains and the roots of each in the life-world phenomena of "speaking" and "language." This book, then, is both an important phenomenological analysis of language, and at the same time an interesting example and model of how to do phenomenology.

I.

The overall purpose of the book is to "study the experience of meaning in language" (p. x). The central thesis is that the formal and apriori syntactical structure of language is unable in and of itself to account for the emergence of new and multiple meanings of words, phrases and sentences. At the same time, there could be no unique and contingent speech-acts (la parole)—which account for such new and multiple meanings—except over against those formal and ideal syntactical structures (la langue). "Syntax is what words need in order to make any complete or coherent sense at all..." as the author puts it (p. 184). He might equally as well have said that words are what syntax needs in order to account for the emergence of new meaning. Meaningful sentences, then, are both words and the rules for their usage, both a rhetorical usage and a logical structure. In short we can account for linguistic meaning only by combining both the formalistic, ideal-language, or structuralist accounts of language with the ordinary language, empirical, meaning-as-usage accounts.

The book is organized into five chapters which form both an historical and philosophical progression. It is at one and the same time a survey of the historical development of the phenomenology of language in such figures as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur; a dialogue with various non-phenomenological approaches (e.g., Saussure, Chomsky, Goodman, etc.); and finally a sustained and creative argument by Professor Edie himself for a theory of meaning which carries on where the earlier views have left off. The first two chapters lay out the structuralist approach to language, the idealistic (or what Merleau-Ponty used to call the "intellectualistic") reduction of meaningful sentences to a set of systemic and apriori rules for their usage. Chapter three considers the dialectically opposed view of language—at least in Edie's eyes—that attempts to account for the semantic meaning of words in terms of psychological speech-acts outside of and beyond their syntactical arrangement. That leads finally to chapters four and five which consist of an analysis of polysemy and metaphor in the manner of Ricoeur; and thereby an interesting