Critical Opinion on Current Trends

Bewitching Oxymorons and Illusions of Harmony

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Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language. Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1953, section 109

Wittgenstein's account of how language bewitches one's intelligence is a singular achievement in the phenomenology of language. In section 426 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein famously claims that the meaning of a word is to be found in the "actual use" of it, and he contrasts this understanding with the projection of a picture:

> A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense *unambiguously*. The actual use, compared with that suggested by the picture, seems like something muddied. ... [T]he form of expression we use seems to have been designed for a god, who knows what we cannot know; he sees the whole of each of those infinite series and he sees into human consciousness. (Wittgenstein, 1953, section 426)

Wittgenstein is claiming here that when one projects a picture as the meaning of a word, it gives one the illusion of a God's-eye view of the word's referent as a thing-in-itself, an illusory clarity that one much prefers over the "muddied" view given in the understanding that the actual meaning of a word is to be found in its multiple and shifting contexts of use. When the illusory picture is then imagined as ultimately real, the word has become transformed into a metaphysical entity. In place of the "muddied" view given by contexts of use—finite, contingent, unstable, transient—one can imagine the clear outlines of an everlasting entity. Metaphysical illusion, mediated by reified pictures, replaces the finitude and transience of existence with a God's-eye view of an irreducibly absolute and eternally changeless reality (Stolorow & Atwood, 2013). A bewitchment of intelligence by language is thereby accomplished, whereby one's prereflective experience of language shapes one's sense of the real (Stolorow & Atwood, 2018). In the present essay we explore a form of witchery aimed at forging a sense of unity from incompatible visions of reality—namely, the formation of oxymoronic hybrids.

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Neuropsychoanalysis (or Neurophenomenology)

These oxymoronic hybrids are aimed at closing the gap separating incompatible universes of discourse—namely, the domain of natural science and the domain of phenomenology. The distinction between these two domains is illustrated by Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) differentiation of the "lived body" from the "corporeal body," the former being a focus of phenomenological inquiry and the latter being a subject matter of natural science investigation. Whereas natural science studies the body and its parts and functions from a third-person perspective as external objects separate from the investigator, phenomenology investigates from a first-person perspective focused on the experience of the investigator.

In the current Age of Scientism or what Heidegger (1954/1977) called the *technological way of being*, third-person study grounded in "objective" evidence has become more and more in vogue. Hence the pressure to base phenomenological understandings on evidence gleaned from natural-science methods. The oxymoronic hybrids under discussion are manifestations of this pressure, creating the illusion that the phenomenological insights of psychoanalysis (or of philosophical phenomenology) are rooted in studies of the brain—that understandings of the lived body depend on studies of the corporeal body.

Intersubjective (or Relational) Self Psychology

A rift has been growing in the contemporary culture of psychoanalysis between adoption of our intersubjective perspective and Kohut's (1977) self psychology. Oxymorons have been appearing in the psychoanalytic literature that unite our post-Cartesian perspective with characteristics of the Cartesian isolated mind. A good example of this trend is an edited volume, *Intersubjective Self Psychology*, recently reviewed by Riker (2020) in the *Psychoanalytic Review*. What Riker does not seem to notice or mention is that the title of this book manifests a rather glaring oxymoron. The word *intersubjective* here refers to the phenomenological-contextual perspective that we have developed over the past half-century in an effort to rethink psychoanalysis as a form of phenomenological inquiry (Stolorow & Atwood, 2018). "Self," from this perspective, can refer only to an *experience* or *sense* of selfhood constituted in a particular relational context, **not** to a preformed entity with an inherent design like Kohut's bipolar self.

The theoretical language of Kohut's self psychology reifies the experiencing of selfhood and transforms it into a metaphysical entity with thing-like properties. This theoretical self, like other metaphysical entities, is ontologically (in its being or intelligibility) decontextualized. It is thus a descendent of Descartes's isolated mind. The oxymoronic title *Intersubjective Self Psychology* reflects an effort to paper over the incommensurability of these two meanings—self as a dimension of experiencing and self as a metaphysical entity.

Phenomenological Psychopathology

…an oxymoron that pastes together the investigation of experience with an objectifying psychiatric system. Beginning with its origins in the work of Karl Jaspers (1913/1963), phenomenological psychopathology has traditionally been an investigation of the experiential worlds associated with particular mental disorders or psychiatric entities. A particularly good example of this tradition in phenomenological

psychopathology is provided by a recent book by Matthew Ratcliffe (2015). Ratcliffe's book—and here is its highly valuable contribution—is a study of changes in existential feeling—shifts and disturbances in the kinds of possibility that experience incorporates. His particular focus is on the loss or diminution of kinds of possibility. One such loss that figures prominently in Ratcliffe's analysis is the loss of existential hope—the loss of a sense of the future as a domain of possible meaningful change for the better. Ratcliffe's analysis of the unity of existential hopelessness is quite elegant and very valuable. Would that he had stopped with that, rather than linking it with traditional psychiatric diagnosing! But he presents it to us as a phenomenological account of "experiences of depression."

After commenting on the inadequacy and questionable validity of psychiatry's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), Ratcliffe proceeds to use two of its categories— "major depressive episode" and "major depressive disorder"—as the organizing psychiatric framework for his studies. In Ratcliffe's version of phenomenological psychopathology, "experiences of depression" appears as an uneasy oxymoron through which he seeks to create an illusory unity between aspects of emotional phenomenology and an imaginary world of Cartesian psychiatric entities.

The *DSM* partakes of what might be called the illusion of perceptible essences (Stolorow & Atwood, 2017). Wittgenstein (1953) explained how such an illusion is constituted by the use of a single word to denote an array of items that bear a "family resemblance" to one another—that is, items that share some qualities but not others. When such items are grouped together under one word, a reified picture is created of an essence that each of them instantiates. The *DSM* will present several symptoms that are claimed to be characteristic of a diagnostic entity, say depression, and a patient—or better, the patient's mind—is said to be afflicted with this disorder if a certain proportion of those symptoms are manifest. That is, people whose sufferings bear a family resemblance to one another become, through the reified picture that has been named, instantiations of a metaphysical diagnostic essence, a disordered Cartesian mind.

The *DSM* is a pseudo-scientific manual for diagnosing disordered Cartesian isolated minds. As such, it completely overlooks the exquisite context-sensitivity and radical context-dependence of human emotional life and of all forms of emotional disturbance. Against the *DSM*, we (Atwood & Stolorow, 2014) have contended that all emotional disturbances are constituted in a context of human interrelatedness—specifically, contexts of emotional trauma. One such traumatizing context is characterized by relentless invalidation of emotional experience, coupled with an objectification of the child as being intrinsically defective—a trauma that is readily repeated in the experience of being psychiatrically diagnosed. This retraumatization, in turn, can actually co-constitute the manifest clinical picture. Ratcliffe elaborates a phenomenological account of existential hopelessness that invites exploration and appreciation of its context-embeddedness, but he encases it in an objectifying psychiatric diagnostic language that negates this very embeddedness! We contend that this criticism holds for the field of phenomenological psychopathology in general.
One of us (Atwood, 2011) has explored in detail the emotional contexts in which abyssal states occur; states that, seen through a *DSM* lens, are commonly regarded as symptoms of severe psychiatric disorder, schizophrenia for example. Such

experiences of annihilation and nonbeing, of erasure of both selfhood and worldhood, originate in contexts of devastating emotional trauma. When such traumatizing contexts are overlooked in favor of diagnosing psychiatric disorders, such substantializing misattributions only deepen the fall into the abyss of nothingness. What a person who has succumbed to an abyssal state needs is not an objectifying diagnosis of a psychiatric disease but rather a context of attuned emotional dwelling.

Metaphysical entities—neurological, psychiatric, and otherwise—cover up devastating emotional contexts, replacing the tragic finitude and transience of human life with a reassuring picture of encapsulated, substantialized, and enduring realities. A perspective on emotional trauma that is phenomenological-contextual all the way down, by contrast, embraces the unbearable vulnerability and context-dependence of human existence and guides the comportment of emotional dwelling that we have recommended for the therapeutic approach to emotional trauma.

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