

BOOK REVIEW

Lawrence Hatab's

*Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of
Language: Dwelling in Speech I*

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Lawrence J. Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language: Dwelling in Speech I*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017. 274 pages.

Larry Hatab's *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language: Dwelling in Speech I* ventures boldly and often brilliantly into pressing contemporary debates in ways that repeatedly demonstrate the promise of Heidegger's phenomenology. To be sure, this *Leistung* is possible only for someone who, like Hatab, has found his own unmistakable voice even when singing in the same key as Heidegger and has generously taken the trouble to listen diligently to quite different voices as well. The result is a model of clarity, probing acuity, and immense scholarship; every page of this adventure in thinking communicates the virtues of a thinker – searching, honest, and intrepid. There are two parts to the following remarks. In the first part I sketch the book's

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contents, chapter by chapter.¹ The second part casts a critical eye on various moves and treatments.

I. ANALYSIS

Chapter One: Proto-Phenomenology and the Lived World. Following a table-setting introduction, the book commences by unpacking “the basic features of dwelling in the lived world” (4). Hatab understands this dwelling to be a pre-reflective experience that is ecstatic, i.e., an experience of standing out in the world and being immersed in it. Applying Heidegger’s early analysis of worldhood, he elaborates the personal, environing, and social worlds. In each respect, engaged immersion is distinct from disengaged exposition, the former including degrees of circumspection and capaciousness. While Hatab countenances a bi-directionality between immersion and exposition (as in cases of “second nature”), he also charts a typical route from immersion to exposition by way of a contravention or disturbance (echoing SZ §16) that makes intentions and external conditions explicit. Exposition, not immersion, reveals, he submits, something akin to a subject-object transaction that can result in reification. There are, to be sure, degrees of immersion and exposition, allowing for the difference between the factual reflection of everyday exposition and philosophical reflection. With this basic account in place, he a) identifies the sense of consciousness applicable to the experiences in question, b) distinguishes his approach from representational models, and c) addresses, among other things, contemporary debates about know-how and the status of meaning and value. He rounds out the chapter with sections devoted to the social world (“the social structure of selfhood”) and how pre-reflective experience is projected and projecting, fundamentally temporal and embodied.

Chapter Two: Disclosure, Interpretation and Philosophy. In this chapter, the theme of disclosure takes center stage. Hatab examines affective attunement, tacit intimation, interpretation, and philosophy as four modes of disclosure, i.e., “ways in which we engage and comprehend what the world is like and how it manifests itself” (73). In addition to revisiting exposition’s scope and importance, Hatab negotiates its thorny relationship to interpretation and phenomenology. In the

chapter's concluding segments, he discusses the import of phenomenology both for cognitive science and for philosophical exposition.

Chapter Three: Proto-Phenomenology and Language. While the first two chapters are devoted to explaining what proto-phenomenology is, the third chapter turns to “the most important component of the lived world and its meaningfulness: language” (109). Language is our “window to the world,” enjoying a certain phenomenological priority because it first presents the world. Yet it does so without “producing” the world or “creating” meaningful experience (109f). Instead language emerges from and with the lived world. Having made this point, he elaborates how language, as the articulation of the disclosure of the lived world, recapitulates the proto-phenomenology set forth in Chapter One. Our lives are fully engaged in a “speech-world,” an “ecstatic dwelling” where the bi-directional dynamics of immersion, contravention, and exposition take shape in language (121). Language inhabits and encompasses a “disclosive field,” triangulated across “the individual-social-environing world,” doing so, not timelessly, but with its own distinctive “temporal-historical structure” (125–26, 129) and a distinctive embodiment in gestures and sounds; the “immediate *presentation* of meanings” in language, so construed, is the precondition of representational accounts (130).

Having shown how language thus “reiterates” the proto-phenomenology outlined earlier, Hatab introduces his conception of language’s “differential fitness,” a remarkably apt notion designed to capture the malleable, pre-representational fit of speech and world to one another. This fit extends to the way that language is an instance of nature “intertwining” with culture, thereby accounting for the fact that language, fitted as it is to the “lived world,” is at once both conventional and cross-cultural (142–43). In the rest of the chapter Hatab does a remarkable job of situating his phenomenological account in the context of questions of several different approaches to language. He discusses, for example, the 20th-century development of ordinary language philosophy and pragmatics; he addresses the dubiousness of controversy over the relative priority of language to thought or vice versa – dubious because

language and thought are inseparable in the “lived world” and because thinking is an “internalization of speech” (147, 149–50). He also makes a powerful case for a proto-phenomenology’s capacity not only to expose “representational biases” (156) common to both constitutive/nativist and communicative/relativist models of language, but also to negotiate the seemingly contrary insights underlying the split between them. He demonstrates how over-reliance upon representational and expositional models of language fails to keep up with the immersive, triangulated experience of language and its disclosive field (to the detriment of many questions of interpretation, e.g., the interpretation of feral children).

The chapter ends with accounts of language’s relation to artificial intelligence and evolution. Expanding Searle’s Chinese room argument to features identified in the proto-phenomenology of language, he contends that the “existential significance” of the reciprocal reach of the speech-world coincides with a “felt awareness of embodied jointure” not found in computers (161). So, too, for a computer “to count as a world-dwelling phenomenon, it would have to *care*” (161). After noting how extensively evolutionary and proto-phenomenological approaches might complement one another, Hatab argues that proto-phenomenology nonetheless underscores the irreducibility of culture – including language and the human world – to naturalist reductions, genetic or otherwise.

Chapter Four: Language and Truth. Hatab distinguishes “presentational” and “representational” truth, the former standing for some appropriate disclosure, the latter for a correspondence relation between a statement and a state of affairs. This phenomenological approach to truth looks to how truth functions in the lived world, taking on different forms in different interpretive settings. The upshot is a “pluralistic conception of truth,” albeit one allegedly consistent with an expanded sense of objectivity and a modest form of realism (“phenomenological realism”) (189–90). As a means of establishing how such a conception works, Hatab outlines six “inhabitive truth conditions” (responsiveness, reliability, workability, agreement, consociation, and sense), i.e., measures of dwelling differently in the lived world, in no way restricted to

“rational adjudication” (192). While truth differs contextually, e.g., from the context of physical causation to one of experienced meanings, these truth conditions “are meant to intercept a relativistic interpretation of interpretation” (207). Still, he also concedes that an argument for a baseline interpretation, like his own, at some point gives out in favor of dispositions, “existential orientations that are not usually susceptible to debate or persuasion” (208). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to elaborating this pluralistic yet contextually objective conception of truth in regard to questions of rationality, ethics, the nature of philosophy, and mind-body dualism.

II. CRITICAL REMARKS

As the foregoing gloss hopefully conveys, Larry Hatab’s book is a *tour de force*, ranging over key philosophical issues with remarkable carefulness and keenness. At the risk of doing further injustice, I raise some issues that might warrant critical discussion.

A. WHERE IS LARRY? THE MISSING INDEXICAL (OR PERSONAL WORLD)

The personal world, we are told, pertains to “what it is to like to live in the world, expressed in first-person language” (22). The proposed proto-phenomenology accordingly needs to “add ‘what it is like *for me*’ to experience something” (23). Yet this discussion is quite brief – indeed, brief to a fault, I suspect, since it is unclear what the addition “for me” exactly means or entails. One looks in vain for much discussion of what an experience is like for Hatab – and presumably, rightly so, since otherwise it would be biographical. But then it’s unclear what precisely the indexical adds. To be sure, Hatab tells us several things that it is not (e.g., “by no means a restriction to...something distinct from the wider world”; “not merely a matter of introspective mental states”) as a prelude to claiming that it is “rather ecstatic immersion in *fields* of action” and thus “inextricably caught up in the environing-world and social-world” (23). But how are these claims helpful in telling us what the personal world is?

B. AN ESSENCE BY ANY OTHER NAME AND NON-FORMAL INDICATIONS

Hatab supposes that his account of the nature of language is not essentialist. Yet claims that language appeals to some “invariant capacity” and that “the fitness of language as a mode of dwelling is universal across cultures” (142) have all the look of essentialist claims. The claim that both essentialism and anti-essentialism “miss” crucial aspects of language (i.e., differentiability and fitness, respectively) seems to suppose a more accurate conception of what language is (something that is traditionally deemed “essence”). The meaning of “essence” is obviously crucial here, but since Hatab names no names, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that his talk of “essentialism” is a straw man.²

A cognate issue surfaces in the employment of “indicative concepts,” ostensibly to act like Heidegger’s “formal indications.” But Heidegger himself is no more allergic to talk of formality than he is to talk of essences. His characterization of these indications as “formal” is meant to signal that the activities signaled by them are not tied to any biography or concrete, historical instances.

C. HABITS, KNOW-HOW, AND ACTING UNAWARES

Suppose we agree – and who wouldn’t? – that there’s something to riding a bike that is different from descriptions of the objects and conditions, actions and surroundings that typically attend it. The pre-thematic experience is different from thematizations of the experience and its contents. We ride the bike without thinking of the bike, the pedals, the wheels, the placement of our limbs, the ground beneath us, the passing environs, often even the goal of riding. Nevertheless, the phenomenological account thematizes the pre-thematic experience, yielding what the early Heidegger regarded as non-reifying objectifications. To this extent, there is a patent parallel with attempts to explain the experience through a kind of reverse engineering, identifying unconscious representations and inferences that motivate and constitute it. Yet, while granting their appeal, Hatab objects that “the question remains whether the terms of such analysis are necessary for, or always operational in, the practice as such” (29). But this objection seems

unwarranted because misdirected. There can be no question of the necessity or operationality of the terms of the analysis since the analysis makes no pretension of the presence, *in the experience*, of what those terms stand for or, more to the point, of their being part of the experience. In this regard, the appeal to unexperienced features to explain experiences is arguably analogous for the phenomenologist as for the neuroscientist.⁵

D. EXPLANATORY GAPS AND HAVING IT BOTH WAYS

Appeals to unconscious mechanisms are, Hatab tells us, “phenomenologically suspect” (29) and “unconscious representation [is] hard to fathom phenomenologically” (33). But why? The reason has to be that there is something about the pre-thematic experience that is conscious (a “wakeful awareness,” as Hatab dubs it) and retrievable (in “reflexive awareness”) (31f–32). In a similar vein, Hatab relates that proto-phenomenology is “a kind of exposition, a reflective bearing on the pre-reflective lived world and presumably an enhancement of understanding” (79). Two problems – one peculiar to Hatab’s account, the other a long-recognized challenge facing the phenomenologist (one Husserl saw squarely) – surface here. The problems are related, raising in slightly different ways the issue of an explanatory gap between experience and phenomenological reflection. First, how does talk about wakeful awareness square with countenancing the claim, supposedly supported by neurological evidence, that consciousness emerges from contravention (37)? (Do contraventions then go all the way down and, if so, what could that possibly mean?) Second, how is the experience retrieved (reflected) or, better, what does it mean to speak of “retrieval” (or “reflection”) if phenomenology necessarily thematizes the pre-thematic?⁴ How would we know that the supposed reflection is not a construction or projection and, even if we could establish its authenticity, how would we justify the presumption that it constitutes an enhancement? These questions become particularly pressing when philosophy is said to have “an *internal* warrant” and to “exposit its own generative environment” when “attending to the lived world” (108).

The distinction between ecstatic immersion and disengaged exposition, we are told, does not deny the latter but points to the primacy of the former. Citing the example of hearing that your child was in an accident, Hatab advises that “it is important to maintain phenomenological discipline and be faithful to such experiences *as* experienced in life, rather than as examples of ‘propositions’” (130). Such advice, sagacious as it is, leaves us with the question of the relation of the presentational to the representational levels. Here, too, proto-phenomenology seems to leave us with another sort of explanatory gap. Can the presentations (immersions) provide a warrant for the representations (expositions) without taking the form of the latter? If so, how does this happen? If not, doesn’t this demonstrate the promise of representational properties all the way down?

It is certainly possible that such questions are speculative and idle, that they cannot be answered in general terms. That seems like a reasonable riposte. But then I’d like to see specific examples of how the gap is removed or why talk of it is out of place. The presence of this gap may explain what seems like an attempt at times to have it both ways, decrying a differentiation of subject and object in ecstatic dwelling (in immersion) on the one hand, while insisting on it (in exposition) on the other – all the while supposing, presumably, that acknowledgment of an insurmountable “circularity” suffices to defuse the issue.

E. THE MYTH OF THE LIVED WORLD

Contrary to the fact-value/is-ought divide of much modern thinking, the contention of Hatab’s proto-phenomenology is that “we *dwell* in a meaningful world” and, indeed, meaningful in a way that is both pre-objective and pre-subjective (42). Hatab asserts that the global meaninglessness (in Weber’s memorable phrase, the “disenchantment of nature”) does not entail existential meaninglessness. While they seem to be simply assertions, they are telling, even personal expressions of the author (we found Larry!). They also capture a general and generally attractive sentiment. However, they also may be symptomatic of a questionable tendency of supposing a world and our pre-reflective

experience of dwelling in it that is mythical because it is demythologized (call it the “secular myth” entailing the question “whose world?”). In this regard, his assertion that existential meaning is not eclipsed by global meaninglessness is symptomatic since it is hardly a common sentiment, historically or across cultures. Hatab’s proto-phenomenology – like much of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenologies – appears at times to presume that the structures of the given world, i.e., the lived world, can be described in abstraction from historical and ethnological, political and cultural, artistic and religious dimensions without detriment to the accuracy of the descriptions. One might argue that Hatab’s proto-phenomenology can explain the lived world of the Evangelical who voted for Trump no less than that of the feminist who did not – but that therein lies the problem, that such an approach gets matters backward. The fact that Hatab sees as the target of proto-phenomenological critique a presumption that “the first world in the background of philosophy must be reformed...according to foreground reflective principles” further raises the suspicion that a certain mythical status is attributed to that “first world” (108).

F. CONDITIONS AND CONDITIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Two distinct claims are arguably being advanced regarding the relation between language and meaning. There is the *strong* claim that is a necessary condition for the disclosure of the world’s meaningfulness, “language does not produce the world but it has a certain priority in being the window to the world, without which the meaningfulness of the world would not open up” (119). Even to experience something for which we say “there are no words to describe it” is to say something meaningful about it; as language-speakers we are supposedly disposed to “prepare the meaningful engagement of...nonverbal experiences” (119). But then there is the *weaker* claim that language is not necessary, it does not “*create* meaningful experience,” it “*emerges in the midst of* an enacted, embodied milieu” (120). The enviroing world is the source of constraints on what we can say; Hatab seems to endorse this point when he later observes that “speech emerges *out of* natural ecological

milieus and embodied practices” and that “infants and animals do exhibit the practical attitude of capacious know-how that is different from language per se” (149).

I have probably mischaracterized the point of these comments but, as it stands, the apparent presence of both claims is puzzling. Indeed, even if the strong claim is intended, i.e., even if language is a necessary condition, why should it be assigned “phenomenological priority”? There are many necessary conditions for world-disclosure, e.g., a certain affectivity, certain projects, certain activities, so it is far from clear why it should be assigned a priority. Nor, to speak for the weaker claim, is it obvious that it is a necessary condition. Consider someone hiking through the woods, looking for a place with the least underbrush. In what sense is language a necessary condition of the meaningfulness of that experience? Is there any reason to think that the person has to say something to herself or even have to be able to say something to herself in order to perform the act meaningfully?⁵ To be sure, she may be able to express the experience verbally, as I have just done, but that ability is not intrinsic or even in any obvious way inherent to the meaningfulness of the experience (and presumably whether or not she has at one time learned how to express the experience in language). So, too, she may – as a matter of fact – have been verbally instructed to “avoid thickets,” but the fact that verbal instruction of this sort took place is hardly essential to the meaningfulness of the experience. In other words, even without such instruction and some hidden memory of it, – indeed, even without learning a language – the experience is meaningful. Hatab is obviously aware of these considerations; they underwrite the weak claim above. But then I am left wondering about the status of the “phenomenological priority” that he assigns to language.

G. QUID EST VERUM?

In Chapter Four Hatab gives us a contrast between presentational and representational truth as well as a set of conditions of truth, but he never tells us directly what truth is. In that chapter, after contrasting presentational truth with representational truth, he simply uses the term “truth,” leaving the reader wondering which sense of “truth”

he has in mind in this or that sentence. As he makes his plea for a phenomenological approach to how truth functions existentially in the lived world, he states that truth “must” do this, “cannot” be such-and-such, that it “should not be taken” in a certain manner (187). However, leaving aside the question of the justification of these modal necessities, we are given these directives without an elaboration of what “truth” (appropriate disclosure?) means here. But since he wants truth to be both “one and many,” as he puts it, he needs to tell us not only what the different sorts of truth are and what its common conditions are, but what truth is.

To be sure, on the opening pages of Chapter Four, Hatab draws on the relations between truth and trust. The terms, he reminds us, are etymologically connected; more importantly, presentational truth is said to “involve” (a word dripping with ambiguity) a disclosiveness that marks human discourse in the manner of trust. He speaks of “default trust in truth,” a “deep background” of the same, “veridical trust,” and “aligning trust with presentational truth” (184). But in addition to failing to make any headway on the question of what truth is, these considerations fail to illuminate the relation between truth and trust. Perhaps at best we learn that truth is something on which, in everyday experience, we rely; but that is at best a characterization of truth (or, as he calls it, a condition) and fails to explain why it has that characteristic.

Am I asking for too much? Or, better, am I missing the point? Hasn't Hatab made the case that truth just is said in many ways and any attempt to say what it is falls prey to the old “What is x?”-type questions so powerfully debunked by Wittgenstein and his cohorts? Yet, as Wittgenstein's appeal to family resemblances demonstrates, these inter-contextual differences of meaning, far from lacking similarities or identities, depend upon an array of them. Just as *pros hen* is arguably not equivocation but analogy, we can make sense of how a term retains its meaning or a semblance of its meaning across contexts, but we can do so only by identifying similarities. Failing that, I don't see how Hatab can have his cake (objectivity, authority, realism, etc.) and eat it (pluralism), too.

H. A PARTING SHOT AND CONCLUSION

As noted above, Hatab introduces the extraordinarily helpful notion of differential fitness into his account of language. His account and deployment of the notion are illuminating, but I am not persuaded by his claim that “the fitness of language must have a certain priority,” that the differential aspect is secondary to it (139–40). The argument for this claim strikes me as too quick – or perhaps I struggle once again with his use of the term “priority”. In any case, there are reasons to think that fitness and difference may be in every respect reciprocal.⁶

In conclusion, allow me to iterate how valuable I find Hatab’s book and how grateful I am to him for writing it. He shows us how to think “after” Heidegger, to draw on what is compelling in his writings, all the while incorporating it into a way of philosophizing that is as powerful and innovative as it is timely and well-conceived. The first volume of *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language* has set an example of the generosity, clarity, honesty, and – above all – the nerve it takes to think like a philosopher.

NOTES

- 1 The review omits discussion of the final chapter, a tease of what’s to come in volume 2: *Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy*.
- 2 It is perhaps curious for a work designated “proto-phenomenology” to run away from talk of essences, since such talk is a birth-right of phenomenology – Heidegger’s existential phenomenology no less than Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.

- 3 Yet it is, to be sure, only analogous since phenomenologists (like
Husserl or Heidegger) would attend to the hidden or veiled but
operative senses and horizons of the experience.
- 4 Given Hatab's gloss on representation and emphasis on the "pre-
sentational character" of immersed practices, the absence of
Brentano's and Husserl's notions of "presentation" (*Vorstellung*)
in contrast to "representation" (*Representation*) is puzzling.
- 5 Again, appeals to phenomena like joint attention and social in-
teraction to explain language acquisition (125) seem to reinforce
the point that meanings are, in some respects, and at some levels,
a condition for language rather than vice versa.
- 6 Since this last paragraph is a "parting shot," another worry can
be mentioned in that impudent spirit, namely, that the priority
of fitness can be echoing a myth of the *given* world (and all that
that may entail).