

Thinking as Fiction

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[T]he element which makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetical science is “fiction.” — Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*

Rebecca Sullivan’s essay “What Is Thinking *Like?*” is a patient and careful intervention into a number of philosophical concerns intimately related to education. I am afraid this response has very little to dispute. This is not because I accept every claim made nor that the phenomenological analysis presented strikes me as being complete (in a work of this length, a full-blown reduction is probably impossible). The reason my response will be light in disputation is because I believe Sullivan has several lessons to teach us, lessons I hope to clarify and extend. These lessons strike me as more important than any disputations I might offer.

Sullivan boldly, albeit somewhat deceptively, presents a devastating rejoinder to the sloppy deployment of an overextended and arbitrary division between “systematic philosophy” and “edifying philosophy” in Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. For Rorty, on Sullivan’s reading, the former represents a commitment to thinking as truth-directed inquiry and the latter represents thinking as conversation. From this account, Sullivan focuses on the validity of Rorty’s claim through a recuperative and integrative reading of Husserl and Heidegger’s respective notions of thinking from which she proposes her own phenomenological interpretation, ending with notes for today’s classroom.

I think Sullivan’s interpretation of Husserl and Heidegger is subtle and convincing. She suggests that a descriptive, as opposed to ontological, interpretation of Husserl’s phenomenology of thinking renders him immune to Heidegger’s otherwise sound objections, with an advantage between them residing in Husserl’s “residuum” (compared to Heidegger’s epistemological residue). Her deployment of the phenomenological method in relation to a selected photograph, along with her recommendations for the classroom, extend

beyond the mediation of the dispute in the literature and, in many respects, constitute a different and more constructive series of notes on thinking—a phenomenology of her own making.

While I do accept Sullivan's account of Rorty's dualistic depiction of Husserl and Heidegger, I think her essay could have used more passages from chapter eight of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—where we find the distinction between *systematic* and *edifying*—to substantiate that Rorty is, in fact, guilty of the division that Sullivan attributes to him. While I ultimately do agree with her expository characterizations of Rorty, I also think Rorty presents the distinction in a far less exclusive focus when we read the text for ourselves. This lack of focus in Rorty only adds to Sullivan's eventual analysis, but there is also a methodological inconsistency in her corrective claims that are not presented with sufficiently clear textual evidence. I also suspect that while Rorty is probably guilty of the exaggeration, his point is a bit less historical than it is made to appear in Sullivan's account. An exaggerated critique of exaggeration is not the ideal vehicle for its destination.

I lamented not finding clear and convicting evidence in Rorty; I was rooting for Sullivan's critique very much, for reason I continue to hold on to, that preserve my sympathy for her project and approach. Rorty's very real and frequent—one might even call them infamous—oversimplifications of the history of philosophy for the sake of making a distinction can also provide an important caution to all of us in our work. As dramatic and exciting as grand narratives about intellectual history may be and as effectively as they paint a picture of clearly demarcated borders and battle lines, they are almost always inexact at best and flat out wrong at worst.

As I mentioned earlier, I do think there is some inexactness of this kind in Sullivan's paper, but it is understandable within the length requirements and also balanced by not being flat out wrong in the end. Although the Rortian pitting of Husserl and Heidegger against each other is, indeed, perhaps a bit wrong but not flat out wrong, Rorty deploys his own invented sense of the history of philosophy across this book in a way that invites the reader to take Rorty's word for it. This particular philosophical form of persuasion is hardly

something invented by Rorty, and Sullivan's paper is a good reminder to avoid it in our own work. On that point, I am equally allergic to psychologizing authors by wondering what they might say or think about a given thing. Frankly, I think we can only work with what they said directly (and even that proves disputable more often than we might wish!) and the rest is for us to fill in.

One objection to Sullivan and me might be the fact—a fact which Sullivan notes several times—that Heidegger affirms the very split that Rorty asserts. On this objection, we might blame Heidegger for the inaccurate and overdetermined accounts of thinking instead of Rorty. It is here where Sullivan supplies an interpretation that not only rejects Rorty's oversimplifications but also undermines Heidegger's antagonistic presentation of his own ideas in relation to his teacher, Husserl. (I realize Sullivan claims to take no sides in this paper, but it seems clear that this is a paper *contra* Rorty in favor of Husserl.)

Sullivan ends the paper in a provocative way that recalls another contested theme in her paper. She writes, "My hope is that this insight can animate educators to consider how classrooms can be place, not just of learning, but of thinking."¹ Again: "[N]ot just of learning, but of thinking." I wonder: What is this antagonism, categorical or otherwise, between learning and thinking? Sullivan seems to consider learning as information recall, pure and simple, incapable of recognizing value. I can see how this account of learning places it outside the zone of care, thus dismissing it from Husserlian and Heideggerian notions of care, but I am not entirely clear on why learning and thinking deserve to be so starkly divided, especially when thinking is understood as a form of inquiry.

The questions asked in relation to the perception of the photograph presented in "Thinking for Ourselves" end, on Sullivan's phenomenological analysis, in a dual presence and distance between a touch of something which, in turn, transcends the experience itself. Sullivan notes that from within her experience *touch* (which I interpret to include both the proximity of the encounter and the transcendence of the experience) is the hallmark of many instances of thinking. Just before these notes appear, Sullivan adds the seemingly minor clause "it is as if" to the beginning of the sentence. I want to pause on

the “as if” to note that the concern for truth that Sullivan rightly emphasizes in phenomenology requires a fictive analysis. This fictive “as if” continues when Sullivan continues by noting “there is something about thinking that, while difficult to describe, I perceive as if it were not contingent upon the spatiotemporal world.” Once again: “[A]s if it were not contingent upon the spatiotemporal world.” As if. This is fiction.

I would propose, in turn and in reply, that this fictive element—“not contingent upon the spatiotemporal world”—not only unites systematic and edifying functions of thinking but also supplies a theory of learning that might work within the intentionality of thought. This is not to suggest that fiction magically solves the puzzles that continue to haunt phenomenology and, by extension, fundamental concepts for education like learning and thinking. Instead it is to suggest that the puzzle itself must be perceived and conceived in fictive terms to become sensible enough for its truth to appear. This proposal is a Husserlian provocation but also an invitation for us to continue this adventure of thinking together with fewer false enemies and more true friends.

REFERENCES

- 1 Rebecca Sullivan, “What Is Thinking *Like?*: Understanding and Evaluating Husserl and Heidegger’s Debate,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (same issue).