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John Pickles

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*Cambridge Human Geography*

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AND GEOGRAPHY

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## *Cambridge Human Geography*

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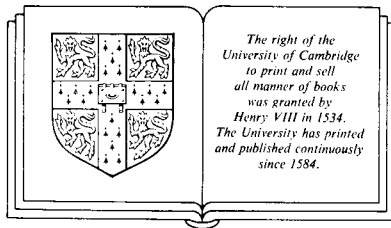
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# PHENOMENOLOGY, SCIENCE AND GEOGRAPHY

*Spatiality and the human sciences*

JOHN PICKLES



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## *Preface*

The modern human sciences have at least two broad conceptions of praxis. On the one hand, there is a confidence in method and technique; a confidence strengthened in the rapid and major advances that occurred in these areas during the 1950s and 1960s. On the other hand, there is a growing recognition that extra-logical and extra-methodological issues influence the nature of scientific claims, particularly in the social realm, and that these influences are more significant than had previously been recognized or acknowledged. Ideology, language, social relationships, and cultural attitudes have now been shown to be important and necessary concerns for the practising methodologist.

In the first case the human sciences recognize the importance of method and technique. In the second case the multiplicity of possible forms of evidence and interpretations has created an atmosphere of uncertainty in regard to any single technique or methodology. With the rise of what has been called 'the philosophical revolution' it has become increasingly clear that without the necessary reflective concerns and procedures any practising science merely perpetuates the taken-for-granted world of the status quo, and denies to the scientific enterprise its primary role as a critical enterprise. But in such reflection the scientist has few methodological procedures and guidelines to follow, and, in turning to philosophy for such guidance, the scientist again comes across a confusing multiplicity of views and interpretations. Indeed, the reintroduction of a necessary reflective component in all empirical science may still seem heretical to those who learned about the objectivity of method as the critical goal of empirical science, and for whom the exorcism of metaphysics had long been proclaimed as the goal of practically engaged positivist science; and positivism has been, by and large, the *modus operandi* of the social sciences throughout much of the present century. Thus, the methodologically sophisticated sciences found it difficult to understand that the call to reflexivity was not also a call to anti-science. In part, the social sciences

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failed to understand what the physical sciences had long been aware of: that method and understanding are integrally and necessarily related: that, as Heisenberg had shown, the looking and the seen are fundamentally inseparable.

Without the recognition that perception and conception cannot be divorced – that no innocent eye is available to us – and without the acknowledgement that science is necessarily a methodically constrained way of knowing the world, science claims to itself a privileged position. Method and technique become arbiters of social understanding and truth, instead of establishers of certainty. In that move extra-scientific forms of knowing and dwelling in and with the world are relegated to secondary positions. From this point on we begin to live in a world where man is patterned as machine, information processor, or gene pool. When such reductions occur, not only do we run the danger of forgetting the nature of human being, but science itself can no longer say anything at all about human experience *as such*. The human sciences thereby give up the very object domain on which they sought to found themselves, and the world in which such science predominates becomes a world where the being of beings is given over in favour of the things themselves. The ontological difference is forgotten, and thereby human being is impoverished. In such a forgetful attitude science increasingly becomes concerned with its technique and praxis; with its way of answering questions, instead of with its way of asking and arriving at acceptable questions.

Generally such issues are consigned to the cloisters of occasional courses on the history and theory of the particular discipline at issue. But in this way the fundamental and grounding ontological understanding for any discipline is left largely untended. This is no less true of geography.

In such forgetfulness of the world in favour of things in the world, the important question becomes why and how such a fascination with the ontical world of material nature, and with the practice of fixing and mending, becomes so predominant within the sciences themselves. The issue is a broad and difficult one.

In this work only a preliminary foray into this question has been attempted, yet such a foray has been a necessary one. Geographic discourse has long delimited the realm of the possible and the acceptable too narrowly. Man and earth and the creation of man's world have always been, and remain, central to the geographer's view of the world. Such understanding has been confined largely to the 'real' world; a world of things and matter, and relationships between things and thinglike beings. Yet if geographers are truly interested in

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understanding “the earth as the world of man” (Broek, 1965, 79) it must be acknowledged that such concerns are inherently philosophical in that they deal with, or presume, the nature of what it is to be human, how worlds are created and maintained, and how meaning provides a framework for action.

The crucial question for the human sciences is not which approach of the many available and currently being practised is most useful or productive, but on what basis is each of these approaches grounded, and what assumptions do we carry along with them by accepting their particular requirements and their implicit models of man, social organization, culture, history, and world. I do not argue that on a priori grounds we can or should reject any single perspective. Such a decision is for the individual or group to determine in the context of specific issues and research frameworks. But I do argue that knowledge of that still shrouded world of a priori frameworks of meaning, or what John McPhee refers to as ‘the Big Picture’, is essential for any authentic and professional research tradition, and ultimately then for any discipline.

Without an understanding of ‘the Big Picture’, science itself no longer understands itself and its moves are made perpetually in the dark. The danger is obvious to any observer of the contemporary scene, where science is tied increasingly to technology, and ultimately to social and individual control. Science becomes scientism, and scientists, insofar as they are incorporated into the production of technologies, become dangerous. Such a relationship between science, technology, and policy determination can only be legitimated on the basis of good arguments, and cannot be accepted by default. Such a claim is not a rejection of science, but a revitalization and radicalizing of its essential and necessary nature.

In contemporary geography the work of the past three decades has left the discipline reeling from a profusion of techniques and competencies, as well as a wealth of new and well-tried approaches. Yet it might be argued that the nature of the ‘geographical object’, should such exist, has been lost sight of. The discipline and its practitioners are concerned less with the core of the discipline, than with the most effective means to move to its fringes and to facilitate accretion there. Admittedly this is the realm of new and ground-breaking work, but it can be such only with a finely honed and carefully articulated sense of disciplinary purpose and identity. Without such identity, ‘approach’ comes to mean technique, the definition of the ‘geographical’ remains superficial and therefore unsatisfactory, and disciplinary rigour divorced from any understanding

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of the nature of the phenomena becomes merely mathematization. Mathematization, divorced from a conscious thematization of the phenomena of disciplinary concern is, as we have already seen, an ideological view of science, ungrounded in good reasons and rational argument. It is also a view where the human subject is likely to be lost in favour of some more readily delimited object of inquiry.

Where the essential core and objects of concern of any science are to be clarified through historical investigation, ontological analysis, and empirical investigation, a reflective attitude is required. The world in which we live is our fundamental object of concern. Such a world is not derived from scientific study, but from our living in it. The geographical perspective is one of which we have prior knowledge and experience. Our task as scientists is, following Husserl, the rational reconstruction of an irrational world. More simply our task is to give an account of the earth as the world of man.

The advantage of a formal approach to such a reflective geography is our ability to problematize the world as given to us 'immediately'. Such a world is always historically constituted. It can always be other than it is. The taken-for-granted and the immediate are, as Heidegger has shown us, not two separate forms of experience, but are intimately related through our learning and socialization into the tradition of the community. It is the task of all reflective inquiry – traditionally called philosophy – to show how this world of possibilities has been concretized as this particular world in which we live. It is the task of a reflective geography to show how the experience of space and place, of land and life, and of our ties with the earth as the world of man, have been constituted through the unfolding of the traditions of the past to create for us the world of the present and the possibilities for a future.

The pursuit of the ideas laid out in this work owes a great deal to colleagues and friends. The Department of Geography at the Pennsylvania State University played host to these reflections from November 1978 until August 1983. Over a period of five years the department, along with the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in the Humanities and the Department of Philosophy, proved to be a congenial and tolerant home to several of us for whom the accepted forms of practice and discourse proved inadequate. The willingness and flexibility of these geographers to engage philosophical issues, and of the philosophers to work with geographers, has been invaluable. In particular those students and faculty who participated in formal and informal seminars in the university have greatly helped in the articulation of these concerns.

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Two colleagues, in particular, travelled parallel paths. Donald Kunze and Noriyuki Sugiura will soon have their own books in print, and therein we will bring this part of our combined journey to a happy and timely, if temporary close. The plans for the continued journey are underway.

Travelling requires that the pilgrim be well prepared for the arduous and unknown nature of the journey. In this task I owe sincere gratitude and respect to three of my teachers. Joseph Kockelmans taught me philosophy, and a great deal more. His influence and ideas, and his guidance through the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, provide the warp on which the weft of this work hangs. Roger Downs has been a source of constant encouragement, good advice, and critical interest throughout the project. He has spared no effort in the careful questioning and articulation of the ideas in this work. Peter Gould has been a perfect agent provocateur, and has helped enormously through his interest in my project. Greg Knight and Peirce Lewis have both been formative and critical influences on this work. I have learnt much about the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger from Thomas Seebom, Theodor Kisiel, and David Carr, as well as from Joseph Kockelmans, in part through the Summer School in Phenomenology organized annually at the Pennsylvania State University. Roger Downs, Joseph Kockelmans, Peter Gould, Greg Knight, Derek Gregory and Peter Haggert have been most kind and helpful in reviewing the manuscript. Of course, while I owe much, all errors and misinterpretations are my own responsibility.

Finally, we all hear about the magic moments of graduate school when for a time geographers, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and others, come together around central issues and common questions. At those times the spirit of inquiry kindles the spirit of discovery. In this process many are involved, only few can be explicitly acknowledged, but all can be thanked.

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