

1983

## Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis (Book Review)

Gary Shapiro

University of richmond, [gshapiro@richmond.edu](mailto:gshapiro@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/philosophy-faculty-publications>

---

### Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. Review of *Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis*, by G. Madison. *The Review of Metaphysics* 37, no. 2 (1983): 405-406.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

Madison, G. *Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis*. Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1982. 356 pp. \$35.00.

This book aims at establishing a view of understanding that will be free of ties to the "cultural imperialism" and "scientific-technological reductionism" which the author sees as threatening the prospects for human freedom and dignity. In the course of this attempt he surveys a wide variety of anthropological, literary, and philosophical material, always focusing on those aspects of the subject matter that suggest the limitations of a scientific world-view. It comes as something of a surprise when the attack on scientism and the praise of the rich diversity of many cultural traditions turns out to be the prelude to the introduction of a modified analogical theory based on the Thomistic tradition. The perspective which is eventually outlined seems very close to that of Paul Ricoeur's defense of analogy, from a phenomenological point of view, in *The Rule of Metaphor*. Unlike Ricoeur, however, Madison does not engage thinkers like Heidegger and Derrida at a deep level; he prefers a broad survey of many subject matters to the more concentrated studies of Ricoeur on specific subjects such as metaphor. After stating some general objections to scientism and to the project of an ideal language, Madison devotes two chapters (2 and 3) to a discussion of anthropological hermeneutics. Drawing on a wide variety of sources, he makes clear the dangers involved in assimilating the practices and beliefs of different cultures to those of our own. Yet just as he rejects the position of the dogmatist who would impose a single grid on the world's cultural diversity, Madison also wants to differentiate his view from that of extreme cultural relativism. I am not sure that this latter effort is successful. Here Madison introduces the analogical perspective (chapter 4). According to his version of it, every culture, in so far as it has a system of beliefs, aims at a reality which is the object of those beliefs. This reality, however, is culturally relative and is not to be confused with (genuine) Reality. The latter, as Madison agrees with traditional analogical theory, is strictly unknowable by human beings. What we can know are the individual cultures themselves and the general relationship which obtains between belief-systems and realities (as objects of belief). So Madison can say with Nietzsche "that all knowledge is perspectival" while affirming that "Reality transcends all cultures or languages" (p. 146). Whereas traditional analogical theory is usually concerned to construct or discern the best possible analogies for understanding what there really is, Madison's version is quite skeptical. He generally refuses to make any cognitive comparisons between different cultures or world-views and devotes one chapter (8) to a sympathetic exposition of the classical skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, claiming that skeptical ataraxia is more or less identical with human wisdom. This skeptical move reinforces the tendency toward cultural relativism. In the anthropological chapters Madison argues at some length that magic and science are similar belief-systems (or parts of such systems) since neither can be falsified for its believers by a single anomalous event or experiment. Throughout there is the assumption that belief-systems are holistic, that every culture has one and only one, and that each sees the world as a unity. In a book which spends a great deal of time canvassing various approaches to interpretation, it is surprising that no attention is given to a perspective like Foucault's (or Marx's for that matter) which stresses the discontinuities (or internal contradictions in Marx's case) within a single culture. One also misses (perhaps especially as an American reader) an account of a culture which is itself mixed and pluralistic rather than tightly unified; or, if a pluralistic culture is a contradiction in terms, it would be interesting to know whether Madison would draw the conclusion (as some Heideggerians have done) that we do not live in a world. In two chapters on metaphor (6 and 7), Madison surveys and discusses the views of Saussure, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Wheelwright, Ein

stein, and Koestler (among others) on language and creativity. Here he defends several "unpopular" positions in philosophy, such as taking the side of the sophists in their quarrel with Plato and of Cardinal Bellarmine in the church's conflict with Galileo. Especially in the last case his treatment is illuminating, suggesting that Galileo was the dogmatist while Bellarmine was upholding the modernist claim that no set of experiences ever uniquely determines a scientific theory. In general, one of the strongest points of the book is its determination to show that the theory of understanding which it develops can help to clarify a number of concrete questions, both contemporary and historical, about the limits and possibilities of our understanding of history, science, and creative language. However, the argument is often repetitive; there are too many unnecessary summaries of what has already been said. The book will probably be of greatest value for those who are already inclined toward its general position and are interested in the illustrative material; it may also have some use as a textbook for advanced undergraduates or as an outline of what the author calls the "non-dogmatist," "non-rationalist" point of view for anthropologists or sociologists who have begun to reflect on the foundation of their disciplines.

Gary Shapiro, University of Kansas