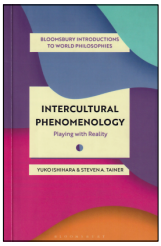
Book Reviews



Yuko Ishihara and Steven A. Tainer, *Intercultural Phenomenology: Playing with Reality*

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, paperback, 164 pages, $22.95.
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Intercultural Phenomenology: Playing with Reality is "not your typical philosophy book." According to Yuko Ishihara, "The epoché shouldn't be a secret tool for phenomenologists only, but a useful tool for all of us to use in our daily life. The main motivation behind writing this book is to make this tool more accessible and ready for use" (2). This promethean impetus surges from the insight that the epoché—or "suspension of judgment"—can be deployed as a tool to practice that which otherwise seems totally spontaneous: "playing with reality." Through this repurposing of the epoché, Ishihara and her coauthor, Steven A. Tainer, encourage their readers to "practice playing," while reflecting on the broader implications of such "play" in light of philosophical and contemplative traditions (in the main, the transcendental and hermeneutic, on one side, the Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist, on the other).

The book unfolds like a multi-day seminar, the five chapters of Part 1, more "hands on" in their orientation, the three chapters of Part 2, more historical and contextual. Each chapter ends with a handy set of discussion questions to prompt further investigation and reflection. What makes this book "not your typical philosophy book" is precisely this seminar-like quality. To *see* what our authors have to show us requires some *doing* on the part of the reader. In the first part of this review, I outline what it is our authors get us to do; and in the second, I try to unpack what it is that thereby comes into view.

One qualification before moving forward: due to my own competencies, I can-

not speak with any depth to what Tainer generously has to offer on the Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist contemplative traditions. For the reader who shares my situation, I confine my comments to the following. Chapters 5 through 8 are constituted largely by a series of dialogues between our authors, which, in stepwise fashion, tease out the core moments of Ishihara's reappropriation of the epoché through comparisons and contrasts with strains in the philosophical and contemplative traditions. Over the course of their dialogues, Tainer introduces some informative distinctions within these traditions themselves; however, one must always keep in mind their purpose: clarifying the significance of the epoché as a tool for play. One should not expect a comprehensive or systematic presentation of the contemplative traditions themselves. Rather, if Ishihara's presentation of the epoché in Chapters 1 through 4 has captured the reader's interest, then Chapters 5 through 8 will help the reader situate this reappropriation, while offering avenues for further investigation. (Complementing this aim is a resourceful list of "Recommended Readings," organized topically as follows: "Phenomenology," "Phenomenological Epoché," "Kyoto School Tradition and Japanese Philosophy," "Buddhism," "Japanese Zen," "Daoism," and "Confucianism.")

In Chapter 1, "An Invitation to Play with Reality," readers find themselves in the middle of everyday life and are gradually introduced to a new perspective, as well as a new vocabulary, which will serve as a guiding thread throughout the rest of the book for talking about what they will learn to see. What they are to see is that they are "seeing with colored glasses" (8). Learning to see *how* we see, that we see with "beliefs," is the first step of the epoché, as it will be developed in this book (9). And once one recognizes the "belief character" of the beliefs through which one sees, one will be ready for the epoché itself: loosening up one's grip on one's beliefs, setting aside one's colored glasses, and thereby becoming a co-player with reality (10). This first chapter brings quite a lot into frame, and it would be hard to see it all in a single sitting (indeed, we will need to dwell on this chapter below). Yet, that is exactly the point: to spark the reader's interest and invite them to stay awhile to see all there is to see.

In Chapter 2, "Falling into Play," "playing with reality" appears in four "cases," the aim of which are to help readers identify their own experiences of spontaneously slipping into the play of reality (15). Here, Ishihara begins drawing us into the first-person perspective, the four "cases" being windows into her own life. Through her sharing them, readers can start sharing from their own—sharing, importantly, *with themselves*. I mentioned above that readers are given a new vocabulary to talk about what they are to see and that what they are to see is something about themselves. If this vocabulary helps them pick out something that they could not have picked out before—namely, that they are seeing with "colored glasses" but some-

times have had opportunity to spontaneously "play with reality"—then they stand to gain something vital from this book.

What they stand to gain is the focus of Chapter 3, "Openness, Playfulness, and Freedom." After the intimacy of the first two chapters, the views here are from a more typical focal length. Through a portrait of Husserl, the reader is to gain a better understanding of the "openness" that the epoché facilitates; from Gadamer and Ricoeur, its potential "playfulness"; and from Nishida, nothing less than "a new level of freedom" (25–7). Since this work does not aim to contribute to specialized study, I set aside the details of Ishihara's presentation; although, it is worth warning against confounding its simplicity with plain simpleness. The language here is careful, astute, and—most important for its purposes—lets all that settle into the background (technically, the endnotes). While reviewing this book, I showed the cover to a friend. Reading the title, *Intercultural Phenomenology*, he laughed and said, "Well, I know one of those words." (It wasn't *Phenomenology*.) Simply put, I would trust this book with my friend.

And then there is Chapter 4, "Practicing Playing," which for your reviewer was just as awkward and dastardly as it sounds. Allow me to explain. Both Chapters 1 and 4 can be thought of as wide-angle views onto "playing with reality." The difference is that while the former is *a* self-portrait—a portrait of how human beings can bring themselves into view—the latter is *your* self-portrait. (If you have ever accidentally opened your phone to its front-facing camera, that is what I am getting at.) Chapter 4 is a triplet of increasingly difficult exercises in "playing with reality," each followed by a guided reflection. Now, it is easy to read the first three chapters without actively trying to see what Ishihara is showing us. One could, that is, get by trying to read the first three chapters for epistemological or phenomenological insight, or as a series of exemplifications of what some philosophers once wrote about. If you were reading them this way, then Chapter 4 will be a shock. You will realize that you purchased dance lessons and have been trying to learn dance theory. On the other side of that coin, this chapter *only* works—and I believe it can work—if *you do it*. While I must say something about it, I believe that if you know the exercises in advance, then you probably will not do them. I refuse to spoil this, so let me put it this way. The extent of my sister's interest in philosophy and that of her philosophical vocabulary coincide precisely on the name of yours truly. I think that this chapter could change that—in fact, I would ask her to start this book here.

Chapter 5, "A Conversation with Contemplative Traditions," ends Part 1 and serves as a tonal segue into Part 2. Excepting a brief intermission or two in between, from here until the very last sections of Chapter 8 (where Ishihara introduces the relation between *shizen*, *onozukara*, and *mizukara*, and offers an interpretation of

the famous Ten Oxherding Pictures), we listen in on our authors discuss what we have seen in the previous chapters. Chapters 6 and 7 take up "Practicing Phenomenology" in light of the "Historico-Theoretical Context" and the 'Personal Side in Practice and "Play"' respectively, Chapter 8, 'Japanese Perspectives on "Practice," "Nature," and "Play."' At times, I found myself at the table, as though at a conference, furiously jotting notes and formulating questions for after the panel. At others, my imagination wandered, as though listening to a calm, well-produced podcast. And then there were times when I felt that I had stumbled into the wrong room at my local rec center. I say this, in part, to economically convey the experience to be expected from, what is quantitatively, two-thirds of the book. I also say this to justify not attempting to summarize all the twists and turns of their exchanges. This is not to suggest that this (again, quantitatively two-thirds of the book) is poorly edited or unhelpful. But it is to suggest that this is still, no less than the previous third, "not your typical philosophy book" and thereby should not be evaluated as such. The discussions are accessible, informative, and well-researched—but in the way that one would expect from a workshop, well-produced podcast, or community event. In other words, these are professional philosophers talking to each other *for a non-specialist audience*. The fact that I found myself in conference-mode at all is testament to the depths that the pair can take their readers. All the same, these discussions only really work by doing: by joining them at the table, listening in, or otherwise stumbling into the room. And that, I believe, is how my friend and my sister would come into them as well.

I would next like to dwell on Chapter 1 and try to unpack, for a philosophically trained audience, what it is that our authors are trying to get us to see. As we do so, I think that we will need to qualify how Ishihara herself presents her project, although this qualification might only be important for the philosophically trained audience, who I now address.

The first step is to get us into the appropriate register, and we can do so by considering one moment in the theme of the book: playing *with reality*. In Chapter 1, Ishihara considers the suspicion that, "We might be exchanging an old pair of glasses with newer, more refined ones, but however much we improve, we're always seeing reality through some colored glasses" (11). The suspicion is that we never play 'with reality' but maybe only with our collection of colored glasses. This suspicion, however, is not tuned to the appropriate register. Note carefully *how* Ishihara responds:

> If our experiences have shown that the practice of suspending judgment has some positive practical outcome of revealing something more about reality, then perhaps we can suspend judgment about the possibility of suspending all judgments? [...] Practicing the epoché on this particular state of affairs allows us to have an open attitude about what it is that it ultimately attempts to achieve. (11)

Just as this is "not your typical philosophy book," this is not a "typical" refutation. We might read it as so, but Ishihara is not offering the possible tu quoque. (*Isn't it just through some pair of colored glasses that you see yourself as always seeing reality through colored glasses?*) The response is not a "typical" refutation because the soundness of the suspicion is not at issue. What's at issue is its *seriousness*, its *attitude*. Perhaps the more seriously we take ourselves as "typical" philosophers, the less "open" our attitude to "reality." Again, we have *to see by doing*. Ishihara's response only works in that register, and it works by evoking a kind of performative irony: *In taking yourself so seriously, are you really taking yourself seriously (as a philosopher purporting to have an open attitude toward reality)?*

It is very hard to *not* take this as a "typical" philosophical challenge. In "typical" philosophy books, what are addressed are philosophical positions, but what is addressed here is not a "what" at all; it is *me*. Crucially, the mode of address is not a claim about me. (*You are not really taking yourself seriously.*) It is an *appeal* to question *myself*. (*Am I really taking myself seriously?*) This must be an appeal, an invitation, for one cannot *see* the appeal, the significance, of this question without asking it for oneself. Once again, this book is trying to get us to see by doing: no seeing without doing.

In my reading, I believe that the suspension in this open self-questioning is precisely what our authors are trying to get us to see. Still, for the philosophically trained audience, the view might get obscured by how the project has been formulated. To see why that is and thus get a better view on this issue—which, it bears emphasizing, I believe that Ishihara has correctly flagged and found the appropriate register to flag it—we need to scrutinize the relationship between epoché and play.

On Ishihara's account, "the epoché is a reflective method of distancing ourselves from our beliefs and judgments," and "play is the practice of re-engaging with reality" (55). Throughout the book she distinguishes epoché and play as "tool" and "aim." A tool can be deployed to achieve a subsequent end—we can put away the hammer once the nails are in the board—or its continuous deployment can be essential to the end—we must keep our cleats on so long as we are on the pitch. The epoché would seem to be the latter—of course not a physical tool, but closer to the method within the practice, the method without which the practice would not be *that* practice. Yet, it is sometimes characterized as an "entry point" to play (107), precisely something that can be put away once the nails are in the board. But if that is so, then what have we just nailed together, if not the epoché itself?

Consider this comparison. Sleep and play are "spontaneous," and just as we might struggle with them, we can also find techniques for better preparing for them. Yet, there remains a crucial difference. One's falling asleep does not confirm the problem to be addressed by one's technique, namely, one's inability to sleep. One knows that

one is struggling with sleep just in struggling with sleep. Yet, one does not know that one has a belief that could actually sustain the epoché until the spontaneity of play is underway. The epoché, I contend, *just is* play, a "re-engaging with reality."

To make this clearer, let us consider the situation used to frame the Chapter 1 "Invitation." A person in a caring relationship is failing, not only to understand her relationship with her partner, but, more fundamentally, to understand that *she* is misunderstanding her relationship. (The problem, as touched on above, is that she has yet to see how she sees.) After much frustration, one day, "it dawned on her that all this time she thought she was trying to listen to him but instead, she was only hearing what she wanted to hear" (7). What is going on in this "dawning," where the epoché is underway in the present? While it is dawning on her that she *was* only hearing what she wanted to hear, the epoché cannot be her *presently* believing that "she is trying to listen to him." That is the belief being suspended. But to be in that *suspension* is just to be *engaged* in play, for her to be "more open to her partner and to their relationship" (ibid.). Her being "more open" means that she is seeing something in her partner and the relationship *that was not there before*. If she is seeing something more in this play *now*, then, and as part of that seeing, it is dawning on her that *previously* she was only hearing what she wanted to hear. Of course, none of this needs to be explicit; what matters is that she *is seeing* a difference that matters. This "dawning" is a retrospection (that she *was* only hearing what she wanted to hear) illuminated by the present suspension of belief (her *being* open). Examined from the other side, since the belief that she is *presently* "trying to listen to him" is being suspended, it is *she*, and only *she*, who is seeing something more in her partner and the relationship. This 'something more' could very well turn out later to be "only what she wanted to" see, but *in play*, a judgment on that is *out of play*.

The upshot is that the distinction between "method" and "practice" or "tool" and "aim" does not correspond nicely to the distinction between "epoché" and "play." If so, then what this book offers is not the epoché as a tool or method *for* play, but a tool or method for making *the epoché* playful. Consider again the promethean impetus of the book: to make the epoché as a philosopher's tool more accessible and ready for use. With the above qualification in place, it might be better to understand this book as offering a method for turning the philosopher's tool into a self-standing practice: the epoché *as* play. Engaged this way, this book is a treasure not only for the friends and family of philosophers, but for philosophically trained readers themselves.

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