

The Transcendental, the Hermeneutical and the Semiotic

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1. Introduction.

The current continental philosophies, apart from Marxian tinges, seem to range across three trends: the transcendental, the hermeneutical and the semiotic. Despite the "decline" of the Husserlian "idealism," the transcendental understanding continues to appear in various terminological guises, ranging from socio-historical through linguistic topics. For example, Karl Otto Apel's discussion of sciences and hermeneutics argues for the communicative community as a transcendental condition for all social and scientific understanding; in language, Erik Heintel claims that language is incomprehensible without a transcendental difference between sign and signification, between linguistic terms standing for something and their manifestation of more in meaning than is required to point to an object.

The task of this essay is to trace out the fundamental notions in the three trends suggested above and to note whether the controversies among them presume some common basis despite linguistic variations. The essay will be limited to some of the major figures in continental philosophy. The discussion will focus on the three topics with respect to their problematics and their fundamental pre-judgments, even if such pre-judgments have not been noticed by the current continental thinkers. In addition, the discussion will offer a brief historical outline suggesting the origin of some of the views, such as the hermeneutical and the semiotic. While not exhaustive, the discussion purports to be fundamental in the sense of conditions required of a particular mode of philosophizing.

2. The Transcendental.

While the battle cry of the transcendental turn in Husserl was "to the things themselves," the turn focuses more on the experience of the things themselves. The primary concern, thus, is to decipher the experiential structures and processes within whose context the things themselves are given. The experiential

performances are radically distinct from the objects to which such performances are correlated. The final ground of the performances is to be sought in the functioning, the activities of the presumed transcendental Ego. The transcendental turn was compelled by the problem of deciphering the activities of the Ego without making the Ego into an object, into something which requires the assumption of activities of awareness that would present the Ego as something experienced.

The task of the transcendental turn, as Husserl saw it, was to delimit the absolute a priori correlation between the noetic and the noematic, the meaning act of intentionality and the meant objective structure.¹ Yet it soon became obvious that the reflective description of an act of meaning something objective became problematic. The act itself became something objective correlated to an act of reflection and hence found as a component in the field of awareness. As Klaus Held has suggested, the reflective act makes the act reflected upon something objective, objectified, while the reflecting act must function anonymously.² Hence the question must be answered concerning the functioning of the Ego in reflection in relationship to its own acts. Any attempt to decipher the anonymously functioning Ego and its acts reveals the following morphology: the living present consists of two factors, the standing and the streaming. Any effort to capture the ego in its act reveals it as streaming, as sinking away toward retention, while the retending activity must function anonymously. Hence, there appears a constant difference between the anonymously functioning activity of the Ego and the Ego's act which is sinking away into retentive awareness.³

The problem of capturing the transcendental Ego as something permanent manifests an ambiguity. A reflection on the identity of the ego shows it to be flowing; a reflection on the Ego's act as flowing, shows it as permanence, as some identical component in the flux of retentions. Any effort to posit the identity of the Ego, compels reflection to assume another Ego, a more primordial Ego for which the reflected upon Ego becomes an object which is flowing away, distancing. What is actually encountered in direct awareness is a process of distancing, a process of differentiation between the reflecting Ego and the Ego which is being reflected. Paradoxically, the permanence, the identity of the Ego is grasped constantly in flux, in decomposition, in differentiation from itself. It seems then that it is impossible to demonstrate at this level an identity without a decomposition of it, without its self-differentiation. Any presence of an identity is encountered not as a unity but as a multiplicity, a differentiation in flux. This mutual attempt and inability to capture the identity of the Ego seems to be the catalyst which led the analysis back toward something anonymous, some

process which Husserl had to call "Ur-Ego" which is no longer Ego, but Ego only by equivocation.⁴

One way to grasp this process is to show its structuration of time. If we were to assume that the Ego is always located "now," then we would note that the "now" makes no sense without the "just having been" and the "just about to come." This suggests that the "now" cannot be understood without its differentiation into the other two temporal phases. What is significant for the subsequent discussion is the fact that this differentiation, this breaking up of the "now" or the "present" does not constitute itself as signification, as a way of one differentiated aspect to signify, to point to another. Using common terms such as past-present-future, we note that the terms cannot signify one another, point to or be representative of one another. The meaning of the "now" or "present" does not point to the meaning of "past" or "future." And yet it does not mean anything without the other terms. Its meaning emerges only in its being different from the others. The others, in turn have no meaning apart from their being different from the term "now" or from each other. Their meaning emerges in their differentiation from each other. Yet the "event" of differentiation which "subtends" and abolishes any direct signification of one term by another, institutes a condition which is prior even to the fundamental experience of permanence and flux. Any attempt to depict one or the other requires their differentiation and the recognition that neither has a meaning in itself and that neither points to the other; rather, both point to the "event" of their differentiation and to their meanings as constituted on the basis of their difference from each other.

Being a condition for the experience of the most fundamental transcendental awareness--the constitution of temporal phases--the "event" of differentiation cannot be located either as present, past or future; after all, it is a condition for the meaning of either of the terms. Some other examples might be offered for the understanding of this unique "event." If we were to say that at present we hear a "high" tone, we note that the "high" tone is not experienceable as "high" without the passive presence of a "low" tone. What is remarkable is that the "high" tone does not appear as "high" on the basis of association with the low tone; association requires similarity, yet what we find here is dissimilarity, difference. The "high" tone is heard only because it is passively differentiated from the "low" tone. This means that the experience of a "high" tone does not point to the experience of a "low" tone, but to its difference from the "low" tone. Prior to association, there is a differentiation. Obviously, the same is valid for linguistic terms.

Beginning with the attempt to capture the transcendental Ego in its presence and identity, we are led to realize that such an identity is capturable only on the basis of self-differentiation, and the self-differentiation is an "event" which cannot be termed either as permanence or flux, cannot be located either in the stream of consciousness or as a permanent point of reference from which all conscious acts radiate. As Ludwig Landgrebe had suggested, even the term "consciousness" would be misleading.⁵ In deed, if the term "consciousness" means a set of identifiable operations and structures, then the "event" which establishes such operations, structures and their differentiations, is to be regarded as inaccessible either to language or to reflection.

2. The Hermeneutical.

The hermeneutical understanding is designed to demonstrate that any metaphysics of essence, concerned with the cosmos of the sum of things or objects definable and identifiable essentially, forgets the difference between beings and Being.⁶ Forgetfulness of the question of Being is fundamentally the forgetfulness of the difference between beings and Being. The effort to find the ground of metaphysics is not directed toward the return to the metaphysics of the essence of all beings, but to the discovery of what makes metaphysics possible. This possibility is the suggested difference. Whether we stress the early, the anthropological analyses of Heidegger, or the later, the Being quest, both aim at the discovery of a dimension which made metaphysics possible and which calls for the abolition of the metaphysics of essence. The discovery of the difference between beings and Being is tantamount to the rejection of the claims of metaphysical foundationalism. In this sense the philosophical hermeneutics is compelled to reject the traditional methodological hermeneutics and the latter's contention that it can provide an objective analysis of historical events. Any objective analysis presupposes the metaphysics of essence and hence fails to grasp the condition of its own possibility as metaphysics.

Regardless of the ways that Being is interpreted, whether as a temporal horizon of the possibility of all possibilities,⁷ or as something that is manifested in anxiety,⁸ or as the "more" of the historical horizon with which our horizons fuse,⁹ one common "function" rules such interpretations: the difference between beings, whether they are objects, ideas, subjective processes or cultural products, and Being. In this sense the difference which grounds both, the beings and Being in their mutual relationship and distinction, cannot be either one of the beings or Being. According to Karl Heinz Volkman-Schluck, the "apart from beings

and Being, there is the difference. It is something other than beings and Being; indeed the difference is primordial, for it comprises the ground for the appearance of beings in their Being."¹⁰

The difference, the differentiation, is precisely what is problematic. It is not one of the beings, because it is the "event" which allows beings to appear in light of Being; and it is not being, because it is the "place" which manifests Being in its otherness from beings. Whether it is interpreted as "Da-Sein" as "being-there" where Being appears, or as "Ex-istence" as an "openness toward Being" as a "going out toward the horizon of the possible," the difference cannot be objectified and made into a theme of direct investigation which would offer its "essence." It remains removed from, although implicit, in any investigation.¹¹ Philosophical hermeneutics is an attempt to trace this difference without objectifying it as "pre-understanding," as "always and already there," and as an event which we ourselves are.

The "event" which constitutes the differentiation between beings and Being is not one of signifying, of pointing to something. It is not a consciousness which would intend or mean something in a univocal sense. It does not point to beings in their essence or to Being as a temporal horizon of all possibilities; rather it is an unavoidable and anonymous "event" which establishes the meaning of beings and Being in their difference. More fundamentally, the "event" of the difference is not only a condition of manifesting the "presence" of Being in its difference from beings as something positive, as something which reveals beings in their movement "toward" Being, but as something negative. The difference reveals beings fundamentally not for what they are but for what they are not. It is a condition for transcendence of totality toward what beings are not. This is to say it manifests not only what things are in light of their Being, but above all what they are not in light of their possibility of Being: things are different from what they are not. We are touching upon an "event" which comprises the condition of negativity, whether in the Heideggerian sense of "being-toward-death," the existential sense of "nothingness" or the current Marxian sense of "Negative Dialectics."

Gerd Brand suggests that the Husserlian Ur-Ego, in its process of self-differentiation and temporalization, comprising the anonymous condition for awareness, is the basis of the hermeneutical conception of the "difference."¹² And in his discussion of Husserlian structure of intentionality and time, Ludwig Landgrebe argues that the Heideggerian conception of Dasein reflects precisely the Husserlian transcendental constitution of the time consciousness: the differentiation between temporal phases.¹³ This is not an attempt to

detract from the hermeneutical contributions, but to indicate that the principle of the "difference" and differentiation is one of the main philosophical themes.

If we grant that Brand and Landgrebe are correct in their discussion of the transcendental and the hermeneutical principles, then the disagreement between the two trends must be located as a less fundamental level. The disagreement is fundamentally about priorities. For Husserl, the Ur-Ego, as the anonymous event which constitutes permanence, flux and their differentiation is pre-linguistic. Various languages, and various linguistic expressions presuppose this fundamental awareness, hence each language, or a particular linguistic formation within a language, comprise only an example of such an awareness. As Erich Heintel suggests, the Husserlian conception of language requires language to be an expression of experience.¹⁴ In this sense, language comprises an arbitrary set of "external" signs for the expression of the experiential process.

Hermeneutics contests this view of language and experience. It argues that if there is a transcendently functioning awareness, the only thing we can know about it are its linguistic expressions. Yet once such expressions are employed, the transcendental functions are interpreted within a linguistic tradition within whose context we acquire our understanding. Hence, the argument goes on, the traditionally transmitted language does not give us "the" fundamental awareness, but an awareness in the context of our linguistic interpretations. A linguistic tradition cannot be encompassed by any awareness; it is more than any user of a language can master. As a matter of fact, the linguistic tradition provides awareness with the possibility of reflection precisely because the linguistic tradition is the historically effective consciousness which is more than we are and into whose horizons our awareness fuses. The "more" is what allows for reflection of language in language. As Gadamer would have it, it is not what we say or do, but what happens to us apart from our saying and doing that is at issue.¹⁵ In this sense, the linguistic tradition cannot be objectified by any conscious reflection on language.

Fundamentally, the hermeneutical argument is designed to show that a linguistic tradition, comprising our understanding and interpretation of all events, including ourselves, is the condition of all differentiations. One could say that the tradition is a "medium" which mediates all experience; thus it cannot be mediated by anything else. As the "unmediated medium," it is the historically effective consciousness.¹⁶ This is the point which reveals that hermeneutics assumes something which is "outside" the hermeneutical parameters. While discussing the historically

effective consciousness as a linguistic tradition, there is assumed a reflection on this consciousness which must distance itself from such a consciousness. Such a reflection objectifies and mediates the understanding of a tradition, and is a condition which allows hermeneutics to regard the tradition as "historical."

There are various arguments which point to this condition. (i) When hermeneutical understanding confronts scientific and technical languages and contrasts them with the broader and more fundamental linguisticity of a tradition, it assumes a position of differentiation and comparison which belongs neither to the hermeneutical understanding nor to the scientific-technical languages. (ii) The hermeneutical understanding as a linguistic tradition in which we live have no signs revealing that they are "historical." They become historical only when they are mediated by a reflection which designates them as historical. (iii) The direct "living in a language of a tradition" does not reveal language but the world; language functions anonymously. It effaces itself before the world. Hence to speak of language as a medium for the manifestation of nature and of history, is to assume an implicit distinction between language and what it points to and hence to take a stance "outside" of language and of what it signifies. (iv) To claim that the historically effective consciousness comprises a horizon which is more extensive than our conscious horizons is to differentiate between them and to show how they fuse. Both horizons must be objectified from the vantage point of their difference. This is the condition without which no discussion of their fusion would make sense.¹⁷ This reflective distance and the differentiation of hermeneutics from other modes of thought is the mediating condition which belongs neither to hermeneutics nor to science. According to Heintel, this condition can be called the "transcendental difference."¹⁸ We are thrown back to the pre-linguistic "event" as an awareness of and differentiation among various linguistic conceptions. While mediated through linguistic expressions, the awareness which confronts such expressions is the ultimate "unmediated mediation." According to Heintel, without the vantage point of the transcendental difference we would not be cognizant of our linguisticity; we would live in language like an animal lives in its environment.¹⁹

3. The Semiotic.

The "difference," says Jacques Derrida, is older than Being.²⁰ The source of this announcement, while stemming from Derrida's investigations of such philosophical trends as Hegelian dialectics, Nietzschean life philosophy, Freudian conception of the libido, also has its source in the linguistic tradition beginning with Ferdinand DeSaussure extending through the "field-linguistics" such as Jost Trier, Weisgerber and Greimas, leading to Merleau-Ponty's "dia-critical" conception of perception and language.²¹ In their historical researches, the "field" theorists have shown that there are no univocal terms for objects which somehow would point to the "same" objects. They insist that we can no longer maintain a biblical innocence pretending that a God gave us precise terms and pointed to the objects which the terms should signify. Terms have meaning only within the internal articulation of a particular language. The internal articulation is not premissed on terms pointing to something and thus acquiring meaning in this signification, but on the mutual relationships and differentiations among terms. The meaning of a term is based on the term's place in the field of other terms.

To maintain this thesis is to abolish any notion of "representation," of "standing in" for something or of a sign as making something "present." There is no similarity between linguistic terms and the supposed objects which such terms are designed to signify; in this sense the terms cannot "represent," be an "image of" or a "symbol for" anything, cannot make anything "present" as it is "in itself." The assumption that terms are signs and thus signify either objects or concepts states that the meaning of the terms consists in this relationship of pointing to something, or of being a manifestation of something which is present. For Merleau-Ponty, for example, language is a system requiring a combination and interaction of signs. He describes the relationship among signs as "diacritical," i.e., a process of differentiation among signs. Following DeSaussure, Merleau-Ponty argues that language is not a sum of signs but a way of differentiating signs from one another. A more drastic expression of this view would be that in language there are only differences without positive terms.²²

In order for meaning to be born, there must be an interaction of signs, and meaning emerges only at the intersection, only in the interval between words, only in their difference. The diacritical conception lends language a power to precede itself, to constantly call for more than what is being said, to demand other terms as diacritical counterparts of the currently used terms. In this sense, we do not learn language by learning to use terms in one-to-one correlation with

objects or thoughts, but by being led to capture the meaning in a continuous process of differentiations among terms. What is essential is that terms neither signify, mean or represent directly nor do they point to associative similarities with other terms. Rather they mark a difference from other terms in a linguistic field, and this difference is what constitutes meaning. This implies that it is impossible for any term to reveal something as "present" as "identical," as having a univocal meaning without at the same time depicting that something not as it is "in itself" but only as it is different from something else. The meaning is constantly deferred, shifted toward the difference required of any signification.

The presence, the positivity, identity, sameness, givenness cannot be maintained. Signs are not only "totally other" than what they pretend to signify, to present, but also lack any positivity in themselves. On the one hand, signs cannot emerge from our relationship to the world of objects and concepts which would be "present" in the signs, and, on the other, they do not point to other terms, associate with other terms in a positive way. Rather the signs "deconstruct" one another.²² Terms cannot point to one another, cannot have a positive relationship with each other; rather each term, each sign is constituted as a trace of the difference between itself and other signs. In this sense a sign does not mark a presence of another sign; a sign is a trace of an absence of another sign, of a positivity to which it would be related. The meaning emerges in the vasilation between and among terms each of which becomes a trace of the difference from, an absence of, and not an identity, similarity with or presence of other terms. Yet this emergence of meaning cannot be given an identity without becoming deconstructed, deferred, differentiated from itself and hence becoming a trace of the difference of other meanings.

An effort to capture a meaning of a term throws one toward other terms without permitting either term to assume any positive meaning, any identifiable presence; all givenness, positivity is erased. This means that any metaphysics, whether it assumes our ability to capture Being, substance, subject or object is forever barred. The nostalgia for presence, for identity and an identifiable meaning is simply an unrealizable nostalgia. The metaphysical nostalgia is more than a philosophical quest; it pervades the Western scientific efforts to decipher "facts." If metaphysics is deconstructed, then science must follow suit.

The diacritical linguistics, stretching from DeSaussure through Merleau-Ponty and ending in Derrida, conclude the circle and lead back to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Despite Derrida's arguments to the contrary, the Husserlian "Ur-Ego" as an "event"

of differentiation and decomposition of the transcendental ego, is the ground of the hermeneutical conception of the "difference" and the diacritical conception of the deconstruction of metaphysics of "presence." This "event" comprises a "movement" which cannot be captured either as movement or as permanence, as presence or as absence; the movement of the difference does not point to itself; any pointer, any sign which might be established to capture the meaning of the difference is a substitution, a sign carrying a trace of its being a deviation, a differentiation, but never a signification. The differentiating movement is forever "different" from anything and from any sign. In this sense it cannot be regarded as "significant." Rather, it is the "ground" of all failed attempts at univocal signification.

This ground allows us to understand why some of the contemporary European thinkers claim that signs do not arise in the presence of, or a response to something, but precisely in the absence of something. The first sign that emerges with the child is not designed to signify the presence of the mother who is the satisfier of all the needs, but in the absence, in the lack of the mother. Sign emerges in the absence of the mother and hence any signification from the outset signifies not presence but absence, not what is there, but what is not there. There is no longer a union with something, but a differentiation from that something. The unity does not require signs, presence cannot be signified; only the disruption of the unity, the absence of the presence requires signs. Yet precisely the absence which calls for signs is what constitutes the inevitable difference between signs and what they signify, what constitutes the unavoidable difference between a sign and the signified. It is inevitable that the sign will not be a representation of something but a differentiation from that something, a trace of the absence of something. The barred unity reveals the difference and gives birth to signs which attempt to master the other, the absent; the other which is different from all wants and desires. Every effort to use signs to signify the presence of something, reinforces the difference from the something. The unity with something present is forever "delayed."

Since the signs are constituted in the difference from and in the absence of the signified, then the proliferation of signs cannot be founded on the basis of experiences which "give" us something "novel." The signs are proliferated, expanded by a diacritical articulation and differentiation within signs. With the first cry, the first sound manifesting the absence of and the difference from the mother, the first oooO-Aaaa sound depicted by Freud, the sign is already all encompassing. Subsequent development of other signs are not additions, but articulations, differentiations

of this one sign. With the first sign everything is significant precisely because everything is alien, different from the sign, and significant because the sign already traced a difference of each other: A-O.

4. Postscript.

Whether it is called the transcendental Ur-Ego," the "difference" in hermeneutics, the "diacritics" in semiotics, the event of the difference cannot be called an "eternal" function, a forever present "now," a "permanence" or a "flux." Each of these designations are possible only by marking a difference from each other, by having a meaning which offers no identity no presence, but only a difference, an absence. The "eternal now" is the trace which is immediately deconstructed by the "no longer and the not yet; hence anything that could be conceived as present, as given is also deconstructed toward the non-given, non-present. In this sense the event of the difference is neither now, past nor future, it is neither permanence nor flux. Here all philosophy, all science, all human nostalgia for presence, identity, the given, fail. This failure is a failure of metaphysical thought. The question remains whether metaphysical thought is the sole avenue to understanding? After all, various cultures have not developed metaphysical thought and yet were capable of understanding the world. Perhaps it is possible to look at the ways of thinking called "mythological" which are no less viable than the metaphysical. Of course, the understanding of mythological thought would have to be stripped of its derogatory designation given to it by the Western metaphysical thought. In fact, the metaphysical thought, in its initial emergence, could be understood only as a trace of a difference between itself and the mythical thought.

NOTES

¹E. Husserl, Die Krisis der Europaeischen Wissenschaften un die transcendente Phaenomenologie (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), p. 169.

²K. Held, Lebendige Gegenwart (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p. 105.

³Ibid., p. 81.

⁴E. Husserl, Krisis, p. 187ff.

⁵L. Landgrebe, Der Weg der Phaenomenologie (Gerd Mohn: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1963), p. 19.

⁶M. Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (Tuebingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1960), p. 15ff.

⁷K. H. Volkmann-Schluck, Einfuehrung in das Philosophische Denken (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1965), p. 120ff.

⁸M. Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, p. 184f.

⁹H. G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1972), p. 289f.

¹⁰K. H. Volkmann-Schluck, Einfuehrung in das Philosophische Denken, p. 111.

¹¹Ibid., p. 112.

¹²G. Brand, Welt, Ich und Zeit (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), p. 54ff.

¹³L. Landgrebe, Der Weg der Phänomenologie p. 31f.

¹⁴E. Heintel, Einfuehrung in die Sprachphilosophie (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), p. 26.

¹⁵H. G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, p. 354.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 367.

¹⁷W. C. Zimmerli, "Ist die kommunikationstheoretische Wende ein Susweg aus der Hermeneutikstreit?" in Theorie: Zwischen Kritik und Praxis, Schaefer and Zimmerli, eds., (Stuttgart-Bad: Friedrich Prommann Verlag, 1975), p. 121f.

¹⁸E. Heintel, Einfuehrung in die Sprachphilosophie, p. 59f.

¹⁹Ibid., Ch. 3.

²⁰J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, tr. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. XXIX.

²¹L. Schmidt, ed., Wortfeld forschung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliches Buchgesellschaft), 1973.

²²M. Merleau-Ponty, Prose of the World, tr. J. O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 31.

²³J. Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. IXXVIII.