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Global Perspectives on Modernity and Modernism: Some Notes on Twentieth-Century Transnational Anticolonial Metaphysics

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Abstract

These notes are structured around the contention that the early years of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a transnational heterodox metaphysics, or properly speaking, postmetaphysics, whose bearer would be the subject of a distinctly modern form of nonviolence. Did these discourses designate a coherent global ethics that we might draw upon to counter the pernicious epidemic of harmfulness in the present world? Can we identify the historical and philosophical catalysts for early twentieth-century postmetaphysics? What bearing does this “movement,” if we may call it that, have upon the question of colonialism? These are some of the questions canvassed in the discussion.

Keywords

Heidegger, modern nonviolence, postmetaphysics

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THE FIELD OF ENQUIRY

I am presenting here notes on a work in progress that seeks to clarify the variants of twentieth-century transnational metaphysics. My main contention is as follows: in the first few decades of the twentieth-century (specifically the period surrounding and between the first two world wars) there came into view a cluster of discourses or sciences, western and non-western, concerned with the elaboration of a modern metaphysics, or more properly speaking, a modern postmetaphysics (that is to say, a metaphysics after metaphysics). The non-western amongst these discourses found their conditions of possibility most vividly between the 1904-1914, the years of M. K. Gandhi’s *satyagraha* in South Africa. They also flourished in the unique spiritual-intellectual milieu of the great coeval modern *ashrams* of colonial India organized around the figures of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sri

Aurobindo, and Sri Ramana Maharishi, amongst others. The contiguous sciences of western postmetaphysics emerged in more muted form out of the various curious interchanges and circuits between phenomenology, pragmatism, empiricism (Bergson, James, Husserl, Heidegger), British idealism (Green, Bradley, Haldane), Guild and Christian Socialism (Tawney, Figgis, Cole, Orage), early analytic philosophy (the early Wittgenstein) and early Freudian psychoanalysis (the exchanges between Freud and Firenzi).

Methodologically, it is important to establish the ways in which—indeed, whether—these culturally and disciplinarily dissonant traditions converged and entered into productive dialogue or collaboration. This for reason of my guiding belief that the field of twentieth-century transnational postmetaphysics provided, *a la* Kant, a “groundwork” for a global anticolonial ethics whose bearer would be the subject of a distinctly modern form of nonviolence.

WHAT IS TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRANSNATIONAL POSTMETAPHYSICS?

Very summarily, the inchoate field of twentieth-century transnational postmetaphysics delineates a project concerned with the “updating” and disciplinary substantiation of precursive *fin de siecle* critiques of modernity through rigorous meditation upon two interlocked themes: (i) the crisis of materialism, and (ii) the crisis of spirit. We may describe these themes thus, below:

The Crisis of Materialism

The most apposite and historically symptomatic diagnosis of this crisis occurs in the field of phenomenology, both transcendental and Heideggerian. In this instance modern materialism is compellingly redefined not only as a desire or greed *for* things but rather as a form of violence or a kind of brutish force that transforms life itself *into* things, that is, into stark or radical materiality. We could make note here of Husserl’s early lecture, “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man.” Also crucial here are Heidegger’s various accounts of modernity as an age of objectification stimulated through the cult of representation or what he calls the *weltbild*, or, otherwise, through the placing on reserve or “stand-by” (*bestand*) of all that is external to the subject. We might also consider, from another source, Gandhi’s numerous critiques of the modern cult of speed or locomotion

as a sort of technology of inanimation, a form of pleasure and apparent vivacity that is actually *against* life, in some way. These ideas gain their fullest treatment in his 1909 polemic *Hind Swaraj* where he explicitly condemns modern civilization for its midas-effect, that is, the triumph of a “matter-force” or *sharirbal* that converts unprofitable livingness into lifeless objects. Against this he posits a catalogue of counter-forces such as *prembal* (love-force), *satyabal* (truth-force), *dayabal* (compassion-force), *tapbal* (suffering-force), *nitibal* (justice-force), and so on. The philosopher-mystic Simone Weil, writing somewhat later than the period being considered here, comes to the very heart of this critique of modern materialism in her 1939 essay, “The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force,” wherein, on the eve of war, she discloses violence or force as a kind of perverse materialism: an extinguishment of the soul or “the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive (5).

The Crisis of Spirit

It is a very important feature of the discourses under review that their critique of modern materialism does not produce a *reactive* or simply *oppositional* spiritualism. In fact, Eastern or Western, each of these discourses holds traditional/orthodox metaphysics culpable for the crisis of materialism. In Heidegger’s oeuvre a stringent anti-Cartesianism assists in the exculpation of western philosophy for its flawed thinking of “spirit” within a dualist schema (mind/body; matter/spirit; self/other, etc.) which cannot but enforce the objectification of all that which is not (the) subject or “Self” proper. We might also make note of the way in which twentieth-century Indian philosophy innovatively rejects pure transcendentalism, looking instead for immanent, empirical, and relational forms of nondualism or *advaitavada*. The consensus here (and we might observe in it a kind of inspired belated anti-Hegelianism) is that modernity’s problem is not “matter” so much as a pernicious or negative type of “spirit.”

What I’m calling the twentieth-century postmetaphysical turn, then, is the emergence of a global philosophical compact which proceeds upon the understanding that the modern crisis of materialism demands a preliminary, almost ascetic, suspension or *epoche* of all existing articulations and experiences of spirit. This is not agnosticism so much as the temporary but nonetheless painful rejection of the temptation of theism (religious belief) in its available mutations. And this is also the juncture at which the discourses under review diverge into two contiguous but competing strains, where one project puts all its energies into the reparative repression of metaphysics/spirit (let’s call this antimetaphysics), while the other impatiently embarks upon a philosophically and existentially hazardous

quest for a “new” spirit (let’s call this antimetaphysical metaphysics). It is this latter strain which yields, to my mind, those modern forms of nonviolence with which I began these summary comments.

POSTMETAPHYSICS AND THE SUBJECT OF MODERN NONVIOLENCE

In conclusion, and very fleetingly, I wish to propose that pure antimetaphysics resolves itself into a remedial program or program of salvation, recovery, refuge for the subject of modernity understood to be sickened by the toxins of metaphysical egotism. Thinkers of this persuasion use the language or idea of “cure” very liberally. We could refer to, for example, the way Heidegger offers his philosophy of *existenz-ontology* as a “cura”; to the emergence within early psychoanalysis of the notion of psychic or therapeutic “cure”; and, at certain earlier moments within analytic philosophy, to Wittgenstein’s proposition of philosophical silence as a “cure,” as it were, for metaphysical nonsense. By contrast to this project, postmetaphysical metaphysics rejects the very scene and idiom of therapeutics, taking shape as an “anti-cura” that draws the sickly subject of modernity into the even greater risks of seeking spirit anew, after being stripped of the protective yet fragile shell of metaphysical egotism. Insofar as the “spirit-to-come” must, as we might recall, recoil from the objectification (the making matter) of any others, its logic demands such denudation of the subject’s sovereignty that the ego can henceforth only be known as alter-ego, and must always be overdetermined by that “auto-immunitary” consciousness of which Derrida wrote so eloquently in his later works. “That strange behavior,” in his words, “where a living being in *quasi-suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its own immunity” (Borradori 94).

Husserl, Gandhi, the late-Wittgenstein, the Guild Socialists, amongst others, each exemplify this coalition of postmetaphysics and self-disregard that comprises the new “spirit” of modern non-violence. The reduction of self to “zero” in Gandhi, the cultivated malady of intentionality and other-directedness in Husserl (and thence in Levinas), give some account of the costs involved in the onerous relocation of a metaphysics after metaphysics in and amongst the realm of former non-subjects.

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