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The Historicity of the A Priori

Jos de Mul: The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life, Trans. Tony Burrett, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2004, \$52.00, xviii + 412 pp + index

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The contemporary analysis of human existence fills us all with a sense of fragility, with the power of dark instincts, with the suffering caused by mysteries and illusions, and with the finitude shown by all that is living, even where the highest creations of communal life arise from it.—Wilhelm Dilthey

Browsing in a used bookstore in Berkeley, California around the time my close collaborator, George Atwood, and I had begun working on an ambitious project tentatively entitled “The Tragic and the Metaphysical,” I happened upon de Mul’s (2004) book, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey’s Hermeneutics of Life*—a chance encounter that proved to be highly relevant to our nascent project. This chance encounter and its relevance provide an example of what is perhaps the central theme in de Mul’s interpretation of Dilthey’s philosophy—the radical finitude and factual contingency of human life and of the philosophies that seek to comprehend it.

In *The Tragedy of Finitude*, de Mul seeks to reconstruct Wilhelm Dilthey’s life project, his uncompleted *Critique of Historical Reason*, from texts appearing in his *Collective Writings*, published more than six decades after his death in 1911. In the process, de Mul both explicates centrally important though little-known aspects of Dilthey’s hermeneutics of human life and shows how these aspects presage later ideas in hermeneutic phenomenology, including especially those developed by Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida. De Mul, in my view, succeeds admirably in his aim, and his book is a magnificent, invaluable piece of philosophical and historical scholarship.

De Mul takes Kant’s (1998/1781 and 1787) *Critique of Pure Reason* as the starting point for his elucidation of Dilthey’s philosophy. Indeed, de Mul’s central thesis is that Dilthey’s *Critique of Historical Reason* can be understood as a

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radicalization of Kant's recognition of the contingency and finitude of human reason. Kant claims that human knowledge of the world is contingent on the a priori forms of perception and categories of cognition, but he also holds that these a priori structures are timeless. Dilthey's *Critique of Historical Reason*, by contrast, would emphasize that even these a priori structures are historically contingent, a claim holding monumental implications for hermeneutic philosophy. In this essay, I will focus on de Mul's account of Dilthey's *transcendental-historical life philosophy* (as de Mul 2004, p. 158, aptly calls it) and omit any consideration of Dilthey's descriptive psychology, which to me is less important philosophically.

De Mul captures succinctly Dilthey's radicalization of Kant's transcendental philosophy: "Against Kant's timeless a priori he sets a *historical a priori*, and against Kant's intellectualistic approach he sets an approach that is based on the totality of life" (de Mul 2004, pp. 140–141), i.e., the whole human being. Thus, instead of the transcendental apperception of Kant, the intellectual "I think" that accompanies every representation, Dilthey argues for a coherent "I think, I want, I feel" being constitutive of every human experience. In replacing Kantian formal categories with "real categories" or "life categories," Dilthey, like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, places himself in opposition to the cognitivist philosophical tradition that seeks to separate thought from life—a tradition that my collaborators and I (Atwood et al. 2011) have characterized as a *Cartesian madness*. Anticipating Heidegger's (1962/1927) formulation of Being-in-the-world, Dilthey also contends that primordial lived experience entails an experience of self and world in which the bifurcation of subject and object does not yet appear. The subject-object distinction, according to Dilthey, is a theoretical fiction.

The historicity of the a priori, according to de Mul, is already contained in Dilthey's transformation of the Kantian formal categories of reason into the real categories of life, because their historicity is inherent to the nature of the life categories. Dilthey unrelentingly adheres to the Kantian presupposition of a constitutive transcendental structure that precedes and is the condition of the possibility of the phenomenal world, while at the same time claiming that these a priori structures of intelligibility develop over the course of a living historical process. Foreshadowing Heidegger's (1982/1961) "history of Being," Dilthey went so far as to claim that each historical age exhibits its own distinctive transcendental structure. Dilthey, in de Mul's account, proposes no less than a historization of the ontological structure of life, and investigation of the historical development of these structures of intelligibility becomes for Dilthey a task for genetic inquiry.

In assessing Dilthey's "advancement on Kant," de Mul makes a valuable distinction between a *transcendental presupposition* and particular *transcendental structures*. Dilthey's principal transcendental presupposition is that of a constitutive transcendental structure for experience that is continuously in development. The specific *forms* of this transcendental experiential structure—the specific structures of intelligibility that disclose reality in a particular way—are, according to Dilthey, fashioned over the course of history. De Mul notes that even the most fundamental transcendental presupposition is itself subject to historical development. Thus there is a tragic dimension to historical consciousness, in that it brings out the "tragic contradiction between the philosophical desire for universal validity [the

metaphysical impulse] and the realization of the fundamental finitude of every attempt to satisfy that desire” (de Mul 2004, p. 154). Dilthey’s recognition of this tragic contradiction leads him, according to de Mul’s account, to elaborate a hermeneutic phenomenology of metaphysics.

Dilthey’s historical reconstruction of the development of metaphysics aims at no less than its “euthanasia”. Although he holds that metaphysical desire is inherent to human nature, what he seeks to unmask are the illusions that this ubiquitous desire creates. Metaphysical illusion, according to Dilthey, transforms historically contingent nexuses of intelligibility—*worldviews*, as he eventually calls them—into timeless forms of reality. Again anticipating Heidegger, Dilthey holds that every worldview is grounded in a mood regarding the tragic realization of the finitude of life. The metaphysicalization of worldviews transforms the unbearable fragility and transience of all things human into an enduring, permanent, changeless reality, an illusory world of eternal truths.

De Mul gives a compelling narrative describing the development of hermeneutics from Dilthey to Heidegger to Gadamer to Derrida as consisting in successive radicalizations of the realization of the finitude of human understanding. Here I wish only to elaborate on de Mul’s view of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology as an original appropriation and radicalization of Dilthey’s hermeneutic life philosophy.

We have already seen how aspects of Dilthey’s transcendental-historical life philosophy foreshadow important themes in Heidegger’s (1962/1927) existential analytic. The constitutive transcendental structures of experience emphasized by both Kant and Dilthey show up in Heidegger’s conception of the “ontological difference” and the Being of beings—the intelligibility of entities as the entities they are for us. As Being-in-the-world, we are always already intelligible to ourselves as embedded in a context of human significance and meaningfulness. Like Dilthey’s conception of life, our factual existence for Heidegger is historical through and through, and our “thrownness” into our historical situatedness is disclosed in our moods. Like Dilthey, Heidegger emphasizes our thrownness into temporal finitude, our “Being-toward-death”. And in a manner reminiscent of Dilthey’s unmasking of the ubiquity of metaphysical desire and illusion, Heidegger unveils the manifold ways in which we evade the *Angst* of authentic Being-toward-death by fleeing into the illusions of conventional everyday interpretedness and the “idle talk” of *das Man*.

Dilthey’s anticipation of some central themes in the later Heidegger is even more striking to me. Paralleling Dilthey’s earlier emphasis on the historicity of the a priori, the later Heidegger puts forth a “history of Being” (Heidegger 1982/1961), which is essentially a genealogical deconstruction of Western metaphysics:

[M]etaphysics determines the history of the Western era. Western humankind, in all its relations with beings, and even to itself, is in every respect sustained and guided by metaphysics. (p. 205).

Metaphysics grounds an age, in that through a specific interpretation of what is and through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age the basis

upon which it is essentially formed. This basis holds complete dominion over all the phenomena that distinguish the age. (Heidegger 1977/1938: 115).

As is masterfully outlined by Thomson (2005), Heidegger seeks to illuminate the great metaphysical systems of Western philosophy as objectifications of epochs in the historical unfolding of Being (*Sein*), of the intelligibility of entities as the entities they are for us. In this vision, the foundationalist systems offered by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Descartes reify the way entities showed up in their particular historical epochs of intelligibility, as manifestations, respectively, of the eternal immaterial ideas, of primary and secondary substance, of the thoughts of God, and of the subject-object bifurcation. In Heidegger's (1984/1954) interpretation, Nietzsche was the last Western metaphysician, whose doctrine of the eternal return of the same captures the way entities as a whole are intelligible in our technological era as meaningless resources to be calculated, stored, and optimized in the quest to conquer the earth. The metaphysical impulse is grasped by the later Heidegger as a relentless tendency to transform the *experience* of the real—how entities are intelligible to *us*—into a reified vision of the REALLY real. He pictures himself as the initiator of a post-metaphysical “second beginning” in the history of Being, in which hypostatized metaphysical entities would be expunged, and he formulates Being as such (*Seyn*) as an inexhaustible and unknowable source of all intelligibility (Thomson 2011) reminiscent of Dilthey's characterizations of the unfathomability of life. But in his postulation of an inexhaustible source, do we not see Heidegger himself succumbing to a seemingly irresistible desire for metaphysical illusion in the face of radical finitude, the inevitable succumbing that Dilthey contends is inherent to human nature?

Returning to de Mul's book, the concluding chapter is devoted to “the topicality of Dilthey's hermeneutics,” conceived in terms of three interrelated themes that pervade the entire text. The first de Mul calls *ambivalence*—the eternal tension between the affirmation of human finitude and the longing to overcome it through metaphysical illusion. The second is *contingency*—the historicity of all human experience and understanding that necessitates an attitude of ontological pluralism and epistemic humility. And third and overarchingly is *finitude*—the spatial and temporal limitedness of human life itself, along with the unbearable feelings of insignificance and groundlessness that accompany an owning-up to this limitedness.

In my view, these Diltheyan themes, especially that of radical finitude and groundlessness, are particularly topical in our current historical era. I (Stolorow 2009) characterize our era as an *Age of Trauma* because the tranquilizing illusions of our everyday world seem in our time to be severely threatened from all sides—by global diminution of natural resources, by global warming, by global nuclear proliferation, by global terrorism, and by global economic collapse. These are forms of collective trauma in that they threaten to obliterate the basic framework with which we as members of our particular society have made sense out of our existence. As Lear (2006) puts it:

We live at a time of a heightened sense that civilizations are themselves vulnerable. Events around the world ... have left us with an uncanny sense of

menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot quite name.... It is [an existential] vulnerability that we all share in virtue of being human (Lear 2006: 7–8).

In an era of heightened existential vulnerability and awareness of finitude there is a correspondingly heightened need for new contexts of human understanding. Here we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to de Mul for providing us with a superb explication of the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey, whose precocious insights into the finitude and historical contingency of human understanding promise to contribute immeasurably to the widening of its horizons.

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