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The Relationship between Subjectivity and Language in the Thoughts of Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida

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Abstract

Modern Western philosophy starts with the turn to subjectivity. Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Georg Frederich Hegel and subsequent thinkers understood and pushed this turn in different directions. For Descartes, this turn primarily grounds epistemology while, for Kant it is equally ontological. Both ushered in forms of dualism. Subsequent thinkers had to come to term with this bifurcation of reality. In the Story of Western Philosophy, the predominant representative of the transcendental-constituting self paradigm is Edmund Husserl. For Husserl, the performance of the *Epoche* brings about a modification of thinking. Husserl's *Epoche* is purely instrumental. Its methodical function opens up the field of research proper to phenomenology, that is, pure consciousness, which provides an absolute foundation for knowledge. Although Martin Heidegger did not mention the reduction and saw no need to discuss it, his writings, however, were carried out 'within' the operation of the *Epoche*, and thus a transformation of the Husserlian *Epoche*. It frees one to turn to the thing as it presents-that is, gives-itself. Unlike Michel Foucault's discourse of epistemic spaces and knowledge frameworks, where

every couple of centuries a new episteme supplants the previous one, Jacques Derrida seems to elaborate only two 'epochs': that of metaphysics and that which arises at the closure of metaphysics. Near the edge of metaphysical discourse Heidegger interprets the problem of time. He is involved in the destruction of classical ontology, but as per Derrida, such destruction is not yet deconstruction. Heidegger's thought reinstates rather than destroys the instance of the *logos* and of the truth of being as the transcendental signified implied by all linguistic signifiers. We are the authors of our own language. Language speaks us as authors of our own speech. The speaking of language is where we are logocentrically located.

Key words: Subjectivity, Language, Deconstruction, Self, Phenomenology.

Introduction

Franz Brentano in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* embarked on an investigation of the human mind. This investigation clearly rejected the premises of idealism, and in particular the notion that the true subject matter of psychology is some universal, abstract 'Spirit', *Geist*,¹ which pursues its course through the world as though related to individual humans only occasionally and by accident. According to Brentano, Psychology cannot take such abstractions as its point of departure. Like any other science, it had to start from the individual case, and that means from the first person case, which is known to the investigation directly.² Due to his emphasis on the first person, Brentano was not able to penetrate far into empirical psychology. He got side-tracked and became interested in an old philosophical problem. What is it that I *know* when I am presented with the contents of consciousness?

1 Brentano, Franz. *Psychology from an Empirical Stand Point*. Trans. A.C Rancurello, D. B Terrell, L. L. McAlister, 2nd edition. New Introduction by Peter Simons. (London: Routledge, 1995), Pg. 174.

2 Brentano, Franz. *Psychology from an Empirical Stand Point*, Pg. 178.

And how is the knower distinguished from the known? In his attempt to grapple with these questions, Brentano resorted to an old technical term in scholasticism: *intentionality*. Every mental state or event is, Brentano maintained, characterized by the reference to content or the direction upon an object by an internal aim or *intention*.³ For instance, if I see, there is something that I see. If I believe, there is something that I believe. In every such, the *content* or *object* is characterized by certain peculiar features. It might be indefinite, it might not exist in actuality, or it might even be other than I think it to be. For instance I may be afraid of a snake, but of no particular snake. I may have profound respect for the founder of my town, but utter disregard for the man who placed the garbage dumps near my land, even though they are one and the same person. There is thus a difference between the *material* and the *intentional* object of a mental state. I am waiting for Peter and someone in the far distance 'waves' to me. I deem it to be Peter. I move towards it to find that it is a scarecrow blowing in the wind. The intentional object of my seeing is Peter while the material object is a scarecrow. The possibility of non-correspondence explains the special nature of the intentional object. Intentional objects are of many logical types. They can be propositions, (*objects of beliefs*), ideas (*objects of thoughts*), and individuals, (*objects of love or admiration*). They can be indeterminate or determinate. But in every case intentional objects have no existence independent of the mental state that *refers to* or is *directed to*. There is no *real relation* between fear and say its intentional object, for the two cannot be thought as existing separately.⁴

Edmund Husserl

Against the gestalt backdrop of Brentano and his philosophical Psychology, Husserl, reaffirms in his *Ideas For A Pure*

3 Brentano, Franz . *Descriptive Psychology*. Trans. B. Muller. (London: Routledge, 1995), Pg. 30.

4 Brentano, Franz. *Psychology from an Empirical Stand Point*. Pg. 200.

Phenomenology and Cartesian Meditations, the essence of Descartes' position that the immediate knowledge I have of my own conscious mental state is the one sure foundation for an understanding of their nature, provided I can isolate what is intrinsic to the mental state, and separate it from all that is extraneous⁵. Second; according to Husserl, the intentionality of the mental makes *meaning* or *reference* essential to every mental act. To zero in on the real nature of mentality is therefore also to understand the fundamental operation of *meaning*, where by the world is made intelligible. From here Husserl sets to working out the features of a metaphysical vision like that of Descartes from reflections on the peculiarities of consciousness. But study of the first person case is blind if it is impossible to isolate what is contained in it. Just as Descartes attempted to separate the *clear* and *distinct* idea from the mental states with which it is mixed, so now Husserl sets out a method to isolate the pure deliverances of consciousness from the encumbrances which impedes our understanding of them. He calls this the method of *Phenomenological reduction* or "bracketing" *εποχή*.⁶ Here, all references to what is susceptible to doubt or mediated by a reflection must be excluded from the description of every mental state, leaving the remnant of pure immediacy alone. In other words, Husserl is suspending and holding in abeyance the ordinary, natural world. Let's take for example fear. I am not to suppose that the object of fear exists independently from my fear. Fear does not guarantee the existence of its object; but only of its own direction towards an object. We are therefore to *bracket, suspend* the material object in our examination of the nature of fear. We cannot however eliminate from fear the *idea* of fear. This is what we are left with: the intentional object, for it is contained in the mental state and it is immediately present to the consciousness of the person that fears.

5 Edmund, Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. F. Kersten. (London: Kluwer Academy Publishers, 1977), Pg. 60.

6 Edmund, Husserl. *Cartesian Meditations*. Trans. Dorian Cairns. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), Pg. 33.

After the process of *epoche*, what remains is the *mental act*, the process of direction itself, which in some way constitutes the essence of fear.⁷ And, according to Husserl, this is the *Datum* for phenomenology. Nothing else can be described which is either more fundamental to knowledge, or more able to disclose the essence of what is known.⁸ Husserl landed himself in the same predicament as Descartes i.e. how to advance from the first person case to the knowledge of an independent world. This method can only lead to skepticism. But the object of this skepticism unlike that of Descartes is not the objective world, but rather the observing *subject*: him/her self. For Husserl, the person or *the self* exists only in the performance of intentional acts. She/he is not however identical with any of these intentional acts. Neither can she/he be the object of such an act, for if she/he were, there would have to be some other subject performing the act of which *she/he* is the object. But who is this subject if not her/him self? This elusive *I*, how do we know that it exists? For Husserl, the '*I*' exists only as the subject and never as the object of consciousness.⁹ This appears to be something like the Kantian *transcendental self*.

What differentiates Husserl's thought from Brentano's psychologism? According to Husserl, his method, as phenomenology is the *propaedeutic* (preliminary) to any science of the mind. For it locates, prior to any description, the classification or explanation the individual mental acts, which psychology must investigate. Besides, it is for Husserl, the only access to meaning. Meaning is thus created by mental acts and the world is present to consciousness only through those conscious acts. Our understanding determines the essences of things, by fixing the manner in which they are known.¹⁰ It is

7 Edmund, Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Pg. 63.

8 Edmund, Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Pg. 64.

9 Edmund, Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Pg. 66.

10 Edmund, Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Pg. 67.

as such that Phenomenology, according to Husserl yields knowledge, not of facts, but essences; therefore it is *a priori* science.

According to Husserl, the pre-scientific world expresses not merely our identity as rational beings, but our *life*. The world appears to us as in the guise of a *lived environment*; a place in which we situate ourselves as acting and suffering organisms. We understand objects as *friendly, or hostile, comfortable or uncomfortable, useful or useless*, and in a myriad ways we divide the world explanation, and have an authority no science could displace.¹¹

Martin Heidegger

Husserl's assistant and prominent pupil Martin Heidegger claims his method to be also Phenomenological: *to the things themselves*. For Husserl, the performance of the *epoche* brings about a modification of thinking. Husserl's *epoche* is purely instrumental. Its methodical function opens up the field of research proper to phenomenology, that is, pure consciousness, which provides an absolute foundation for knowledge. Heidegger did not mention Husserl's reduction and saw no need to discuss it¹². Husserl seems to have been aggrieved by this fact. Heidegger's writings were however carried out *within* the operation of the *epoche*, and thus is a transformation of the Husserlian *epoche*. Tugendhat even goes so far as to say that Husserl enters the dimension of Heidegger's being in the world via the *epoche*.¹³ It frees one to turn to the thing as it presents—that is, gives-itself. Philosophy for Heidegger is the study of that which *shows itself*.¹⁴ Phenomena are not just mere

11 Edmund, Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Pg. 65.

12 Compare Spiegelberg, H. *The Phenomenological Movement*, (Second Edition). (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), Vol. I, Pg. 281-283. Heidegger performed this operation before he began to write.

13 See Tugendhat, Ernst. *Der Wahrheitsbegriff bei Husserl und Heidegger*, (Berlin Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1967), Pg. 263.

14 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and E. Robinson. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

appearances but those things which show themselves to consciousness. Again, like Husserl, we see Heidegger establishing the priority of phenomenology over any physical or psychical science. Phenomenology for Heidegger is also the fundamental form of *Ontology*—the study of what *is*. Although phenomenology has its roots in Descartes, Heidegger pries it loose from its moorings to epistemology. Henceforth, there is only one question in this single-mindedness to guide thought. It is the question regarding *the meaning of being*. According to Heidegger, this question was the subject-matter for all those ancient philosophies, Socratic and pre-Socratics, which Descartes covered over. 'Being' (*Sein*) must be distinguished from *Dasein* (being there). The latter is the kind of being that characterizes human self-consciousness. It is the thing which understands self-consciousness. Heidegger further introduces a third term *Existenz* to denote 'the kind of being toward which *Dasein* can comport itself in one way or another, and always does comport itself somehow.' *Dasein*, by contrast has its being *for its own*. This is what Hegel would call 'being-for-itself,' or, in Sartrean terms *etre pour-soi*. Unlike Husserl, however, Heidegger steers clear of the usage of the traditional terms: "subject" and 'object.' He manufactures and multiplies his own terms beyond measure, but he is very obviously engaged with the modern problem of self-knowledge, what it is, what its object is, and what it yields as insight into the objective world. Again, like Husserl and Descartes, Heidegger begins from the first person case. Heidegger states that the assertion: "it is I who in each case *Dasein* is," is *ontically* obvious.¹⁵ But there is a difference between *ontical* obviousness and content. We must answer 'the problem of being'. For it is this that presents itself as the question "Who" (what) am I? Phenomenological analysis discloses the essence of *Dasein* to lie in its existence, and it has existence essentially. According to Heidegger, all being is *being-in-the-world*, and as such, the essence of the world as phenomenon must be explored if being is to be understood. The world

¹⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Paragraph 115, page 150

contains things, but thing-hood must not be taken in its modern scientific meaning, rather, in its ancient sense. Objects are “to be used”, or “ready to hand”.¹⁶ Hence we can understand them as *signs*, meaning that we interpret them as bearing immediate relation to ourselves.

The world first comes into consciousness as a ‘sign,’ *logos*. *Logos* is that which bears meaning for us. It is this that sought to explain *Dasein*’s fascination with the world. Apparently, independent objects can be constantly appropriated for *Dasein*’s own uses, made into expression, and assigned a meaning. This is the ‘abolition of distance’ (*Entfernen*) between objects and ourselves. According to Heidegger, this proscribing of distance is that which makes accessible the ‘phenomenon’ of *space*. For it is that which leads one’s sense of having spatial position in one’s world.¹⁷

Dasein’s peaceful union with its world is shattered by the appearance of the other, my existence is thereof put in question. I become aware of my ‘thrown-ness’ (*Geworfenheit*), –i.e. the lack of any reason for my existence in the world. This is the fact that I am simply here. It is this for instance which appears in the phenomenon of fear, and which orchestrates the turning away from the world. It is also that which Hegel, Feuerbach and Marx had termed alienation. Heidegger in language redolent of religious discourse calls it ‘the Fall’. So *Dasein* falls, but neither into sin, nor hell, but rather into ‘in-authenticity.’ Face to face with the absolute mystery or enigma of my being, I fly from myself. I loose myself in anxiety, and, in order to escape that anxiety, I try to cease to be myself. And instead I become one of ‘them’. I become an object, part of the world which first broke my composure by exposing my arbitrariness, and which now tempts me to deny myself, by disappearing into the impersonal ‘they’ of role, form and ideal. ‘In-authenticity’ introduces absurdity which individualizes. And precisely because its intentionality is universal, not

16 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*.P. 116

17 Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, Pg. 84 -89.

differentiated, and without focus, it can only be understood as mine. Individualism introduces the exercise of a mental ability; *Sorge* or Care. This attitude of the anxious self to the world is one of care. This spells inapprehension for itself and for others, and jump-starts the attempt to understand the world as an object of knowledge and activity. The caring self finds a new kind of being, 'a being towards death'. I recognize myself as a creature conditioned by time. My being is in time, not just in the sense that all things are in time, but in the more profound sense that time must form and determine my entire outlook on the world, separating the future from the past. I am a being who is extended in time, and whose redemption lies in that freedom which time alone provides, the freedom to make my life what I choose it to be, thereby changing from 'thrown-ness' to 'resoluteness'.¹⁸

Indubitably, there is poetry here in Heidegger, and moments of philosophic insights as well. But *Being and Time*, Heidegger's *Magnum Opus* appears to be no more than a spiritual odyssey. Heidegger is caught up still in the metaphysics of Ontology and of mystification in the bad sense. Most of the central themes of *Being and Time* are mainly unsubstantiated assertions. So that even if Heidegger's thoughts were true, we would, need to be given justifications to accept these claims.

If, as Heidegger asserts, that one brings entities to language, i.e. to meaningful presence in *Logos*, then, it is also, more true that one does so precisely by not having language at one's disposal. There is no voice to tell us what entities are. Only silence. The silence that characterizes the absence that makes possible the meaningful presence of entities in *Logos*, and the most authentic response to such silence is to keep silent about silence by letting absence be absence. Such stance might be called a 'hearing', a hearing of being's own message. That there is no message other than the already given-ness of meaning in the space of one's own self absence, the meaning of being is apparently not a doctrine to be learned but a risk to be taken.

¹⁸ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, Pg. 213.

And if one does not take that risk, as Heidegger used to tell his students, 'all talk and listening is in vain. And in that case I would urge you to burn your lecture notes, however precise they may be—and the sooner the better.'

Jacques Derrida

In the second of a triple 'preface' with a double heading: *The end of the book and the beginning of writing/Writing before the Letter*, Derrida says; " by a slow movement, whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward, and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language, beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under the name of writing—no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of Language in general (whether understood as communication, relation, expression, signification, constitution of meaning or thought, etc), no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, the *signifier of the signifier*—is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all sense of the word, writing thus *comprehends language*.¹⁹

Derrida, in the opening bars of the *Of Grammatology* starts what appears to be an attack on writing: writing, especially as supplanting speech and the spoken word. This rather innocent and painstaking analysis very slowly takes up a life of its own to be but an attack on the very substance of Western metaphysical discourse. And before long the truth is out. *Writing* has supplanted freedom and plurality. 'The idea of the book is the idea of Totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier.'²⁰ Western tradition had organized itself through the metaphysics of presence, and that metaphysics is now not tenable. It has become a monstrosity, *a presence* that one needs to get around. Heidegger had been caught in that very metaphysics of presence,

¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), Pg. 3.

²⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, Pg.7.

but that it is that provides an opening for Derrida to begin the 'challenge on the very form of questioning that escapes the instituting question of philosophy' which is: "what is?"²¹ Western metaphysics, as the limitation of the sense of being within the field of presence, according to Derrida, is produced as the domination of a linguistic form. There is need to question the origin of this domination as a questioning of the history of the West as that which produced Transcendentality. Heidegger had, in *Zur Seinsfrage*, a letter to Ernst Junger, let the word *being* be read only if it is crossed out: ~~being~~. Word and deletion are then read/not read together. The mark of deletion says Derrida is not merely a negative symbol but ought to be seen as the final writing of an epoch. Under it the presence of a transcendental signifier, is effaced while still remaining legible, is destroyed while making visible the very idea of the sign. In as much as it de-limits onto-theology, the history of metaphysics for Derrida is a history of a series of breaks and ruptures. The break for instance between the *divine word* and the *book of nature*, *speaking* and *writing*, *being* and *beings*. For such binary oppositions form the core of the era of Metaphysics. This transformation ought to have done away with the old terms by ushering in entirely new sets of terms. But Heidegger is working with the conceptual tools and resources of the old language, the language we already possess, and which of course possess us.²² While it is the word, the master word *being* that Heidegger crosses out, Derrida's strategy is different. He does not reject this, but his word is *Trace*, a word that cannot be a master word. For many other words can stand for it and for themselves for instance *arche-writing*, *track*, *footprint*, *imprint*, *difference*, *differance*. Any of these words present themselves as 'the mark of an anterior presence.'²³ Derrida then embarks on a strategy of mounting his attack on Western metaphysics with the notion of *differance* which inhabit structures from within, operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing them

21 Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, Pg. 19.

22 Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Pg. iv.

23 Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Pg. 23.

structurally without being able to isolate their elements and atoms. And as Derrida points out, this exercise had already been begun by Hegel. And the relationship governing the old structure and the emerging new had been *Aufhebung*, a subsuming relationship between the new and the old. It could be said that this was already present in Kant as well in the notion that critique can provide tools for the fulfillment of a *telos*.

Heidegger's transposition of the place of logos makes it to no longer be the universal structure of what is said apart from we who listen to it. We are instead situated along side *logos* in the ontological difference. *Logos qua* language is both the house and the name of being of beings. On this, *logos* is taken to its limits where language itself occupies the place of the *indecidable* or *hinge* at the edge of the discourse of metaphysics. In Derrida's discourse, Deconstruction is the praxis wielded in the movement to the limit, border, or hinge, and by which *differance* is inscribed as *arche-writing*. Deconstruction is structured; it situates itself at the intersection of the inside and the outside, the word and the concept, ordinary writing and speaking. Deconstruction is not destruction, which is a tearing apart, analyzing into atomic units, nor is it construction, a bringing together, synthesizing into a unified totality. Deconstruction involves both destruction and construction. It operates at the juncture which Merleau-Ponty describes as *Chiasm*, the intertwining between the visible and the invisible, between philosophy and non-philosophy. It fills out the Heideggerian *in-between* as indicated by the crossing out of being (*Sein*) in the *Seinsfrage*. 'What is important is learning to live in the speaking of language. Language speaks. It's speaking speaks for us in what has been spoken.'²⁴ We are the authors of our own language. Language speaks us as authors of our own speech. The speaking of language is where we are logo-centrally located.

²⁴ See Heidegger, Martin, *Language, Poetry, Language, Thought*, Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), Pg.210.

Conclusion

The status of the self, inquirer, or investigator, how introduced, where situated, and in what manner incorporated into the field of relevant elements-is of paramount importance. Similarly the nature of that which is under investigation is regarded as intricately bound up with the investigator, whether as subject, structure, or ideological construct. In virtually all cases, the relations or systems of elements within the whole cannot be ignored or left aside without dire effects. The self is not only at the center of consciousness, but also at the center of the human person. The intentional acts of constitution can be re-iterated and repeated continuously. Each act is traceable to a center (the transcendental ego) the human person acts without end. Pure phenomenology is granted upon a transcendental ego because there will be no end to the human person so long as the egocentric doctrine is propounded.

When Heidegger sets *being* before all concepts, it was an attempt to free language from the fallacy of a fixed end. For as Heidegger delights in repeating that 'language is the house of being', Derrida's *errature* points to an inarticulate presence while Heidegger's crossed being is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent presence; of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience. From some more or less different yet similar contingencies, both Heidegger and Derrida teach us to use language in terms of a trace-structure, effacing it even as it presents its eligibility. With regards however to the contents of philosophy, Husserl only renews the old demand of Socrates and Plato, of Descartes and Kant. Again, yet he purports to make a new beginning, and refuses to attribute ultimate reality to philosophy, for in his take, Philosophy is not merely an imperfect science, it is not a science.