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**Moral Reflection as Hermeneutical:
From the Teleological to the Historical**

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The Western classical period of moral thought was characteristically based on a philosophy of being. In other words, it based itself on the study and knowledge of the fundamental act by which things are and in so far as they are, thus on the study and knowledge of the first principles governing such a wonderful act of be-ing. *Theoria* or the vision or the grasp of such first principles was viewed to be the ground of all *praxis* or action. Moral action then must be guided by the *arche*, the first principles of being knowable through the exercise of human reason or *logos*, by which man as thought in some way is able to coincide with and become the very reflective act by which and in which the act of being returns to itself and thereby knows itself.

Aristotle's *teleological* ethics as found mainly in his *Nicomachean Ethics* would be an example of such a way of thinking about morality. In the peripatetic view, human action must be guided by man's end or *telos*. This end is dictated by man's nature, man's specific mode of being, which to a certain degree is knowable. Like everything else, man is a certain composition of *matter* and *form*, in other words, a certain metaphysical tension between a principle which specifies man's determined being or level of existence and a principle of potentiality.

Starting from man's particular activity or activities, we can arrive at man's nature, the source of the activity, more particularly,

man's *form*. In Aristotle's view, the activity proper to man is rational activity, that which distinguishes us from sentient beings or animals. Thus man is said to be a *rational animal*. It is reason then, which is proper to man's nature and thus the end and purpose of man must be some form of rational activity.

Aristotle does allow for some indeterminacy in so far as ethics properly belongs to the realm of action rather than theory or knowledge. Hence, he distinguishes between *episteme* and *phronesis*, the practical knowledge proper to moral action. Nonetheless, the principles governing human action are determinable on metaphysical grounds. From man's proper activity and nature we can know man's end, namely, the moral and intellectual virtues. In other words, man's end, first, lies in a kind of life wherein reason governs his drives and emotions within the framework of the city-state or the *polis*. Secondly, man's end lies in contemplation, the highest activity of human reason, wherein man becomes like the gods to the extent that through contemplation man's activity coincides with the divine activity by which the Divine Intellect knows itself.

By acting in accordance with his nature and end, man therefore achieves the fulfillment of his being. In so doing, man attains true happiness and the good life.

The modern period initiates a new way of thinking, grounded no longer in being or in nature but in the human subjectivity. With the coming of modern experimental science, the Greek notion of *phusis* had to give way to the modern notions of "objective" space and time and mathematizable variables, thereby converting the world to "phenomena," to a set of alternative possibilities of transformation. In such a "world," the ground eventually shifted to man himself, not man as part of nature, but man as "subject," as opposed to the "object" world, man as consciousness, the source of the constructs and the mathematical models, man as will, origin of technological transformations and center point of reference for all values and meanings.

A good example of the modern way of viewing ethics would of course be Kant, who grounds morality on the human will, more exactly the "good will."¹ Morality or the good could be

1. This part is based mainly on Immanuel Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. A good translation is that of H.J. Paton, *The Moral Law, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1962).

grounded neither in nature nor God nor the consequences of one's acts, since such procedures would only introduce one form or other of "heteronomy" into morality. Morality, properly speaking, could only be "autonomous," in other words, grounded in itself, thus, in the human will. That which makes the will good is not some norm outside of itself, but the will itself as rational, as formal exigency for universality.

If the will is its own norm, being a law unto itself, man however is both rational and finite being. Thus, he is a being of reason as well as a being of needs and inclinations. In this sense, morality for man is not one of pure spontaneous will, but one wherein the will is divided between the rational will, and the "pathological" will. Morality then for man appears as an imperative, a command to submit our inclinations to the exigencies of the rational will, thus, the exigencies of universality. Such a command is not conditioned by any external object or norm. It originates from the rational will itself being consistent with itself as rational. Morality then appears as an unconditioned command, as a "categorical imperative" — "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

In fine, for Kant the ground of morality is the dignity of man himself as rational will, the capacity to rise above mere physical causality and empirical motives and be a self-originating cause unconditioned by any antecedent external causes, the capacity for self-determination according to the demands of his very will as rational. Ultimately then, for Kant the ground of morality is human liberty itself.

The postmodern period may be characterized as one where reason ceases to regard itself as ultimate ground, whether as a logico-empirical mind generating all kinds of concepts and rules, or as a transcendental ego in the midst of an objective world, or as an absolute *Geist* comprehending all things as well as itself. Nor is there an attempt merely to duplicate the philosophy of being of classical antiquity. Rather, there seems to be a general feeling that reason is deeply beholden to something other than itself, whether in the guise of the preexisting or "ordinary" language, or some kind of over-all "structure" underlying all human thought and action, governing his whole existence behind his back, as it were. Or else, there is the attempt to ground reason in the histo-

rical situation, this ever-moving living present of human existence, being the result of past institutionalized thoughts, feelings, and actions and of future common hopes and anticipations.

We may take as an example of such postmodern way of thinking the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and that of his disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer. Although no formally developed ethical thought has yet come out of this stream of postmodern philosophy, it may be possible to gather from its fundamental lines of thinking some clear indications for a postmodern, moral philosophy.²

Heidegger, from his very first major work, *Sein und Zeit*,³ set about to do a "hermeneutic of facticity," in other words, to show that what fundamentally determines human existence is its historicity. This signifies at one and the same time a mode of consciousness and a mode of existence, the two together inseparably intermeshed. On one hand is a mode of consciousness which is truly temporal, ever rooted in the present even as it tries to make sense of itself by way of a recuperative return to its past as well as a projective reflection on its future, thus, never attaining to some eternal *nunc stans*. On the other hand is a mode of existence defined by the fact of his very "facticity," in the sense that man is not the source or ground of his own existence, that he is to himself a strange given fact (*Befindlichkeit*), finding himself "thrown" from a past not of his choice (*Geworfenheit*) and ordained to a future not quite within his control (*Entwurf*).⁴

Being a strange given fact to himself, he is thus not immediately comprehensible to himself. There is a need to unravel, to "interpret" one's existence.⁵ This would mean a going back to one's past, an interpreting of one's past in order to understand his present situation as well as his future, for man precisely is historical being. He is not transparent to himself. He does not get to

2. Examples of such an attempt may be seen in Jean-Luc Marion, "Une nouvelle morale provisoire: la liberté d'être libre" in "La Morale, Sagesse et Salut," (Textes présentés par Claude Bruaire, Communio, Fayard, Paris, 1981), pp. 125-41; and also Reiner Schurmann, "Withering Norms: Deconstructing the Foundation of the Social Sciences," in *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, ed Norma Haan, Robert N. Bellah, Paul Rabinow, William M. Sullivan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) pp. 177-94.

3. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Niemeyer, Halle, 1927). "Being and Time," trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962).

4. Ibid., pp. 131-88.

5. Ibid., pp. 188-203.

understand himself in his very act of existing, but only subsequently, through a recuperation or retrieval of his past, through a reading and interpretation of the traces to be gleaned from his past history.⁶

Heidegger thus goes back to reflect upon the Western past tradition and in it he discovers or uncovers a whole series of instances of forgetfulness of one's historical being and thus forgetfulness of the thought of being itself.⁷ A great part of Western history, in Heidegger's view, consists of a procession of periods or epochs, each of which may be characterized as an attempt to ground reality in some absolute, over-arching *arche* or principle, with which, through thought and action, man is able to master and control reality. We see then down the ages a succession of epochal principles – the ideal forms, God, the moral law, the authority of reason, progress, the happiness of the greatest number, culture, fabulatory images all, fashioned by the epochs, each for its own purposes, but always out of some deep-seated will of man to possess and dominate and shape everything to man's image of himself.

The very uncovering in our present historical moment of such an overweening drive of man to dominate things through such epochal, metaphysical principles should usher in the end of the procession of epochal principles and thus bring about the undoing or "deconstruction of metaphysics" (*Abbau*),⁸ thereby leading to the dis-solution of such dominating rational constructions and the unveiling (*aletheia*) of being. In other words, man, or more exactly Western man, in the present historical moment, going back to his past by way of Heidegger's reflections, becomes aware of his past forgetfulness of being, and now realizes that he must learn to let go, as it were, and thereby allow the coming to presence of being.

At this point Heidegger takes heed so as not to fall back into the same temptation of his predecessors. We must not set bounds to being. We must not "enframe" being (*Gestell*).⁹ We must not force it. We must let being of itself become manifest. Indeed, the

6. See William J. Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger, Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), pp. 630–33.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 301–400.

8. Reiner Schurmann, "Withering Norms", p. 181.

9. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and with an Introduction by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977), pp. 19 ff.

coming to presence of being is a gift, a "fateful occurrence" (*Geschick*).¹⁰

Man however is not simply to remain completely passive as he waits upon being. Precisely as historical being, man has the role of being the interpreter of being. Man is he who is the messenger who bridges the hiatus between the hiddenness and the disclosure of being in history. Hence, he is *Dasein*. And it is in responding to and living by this manifestation of being in man's historical present as disclosed by this hermeneutic relationship that man comes to himself as historical being.¹¹ In the exercise of this role man must question being, and in so doing he is led to question the past manifestations or non-manifestations of being, not however in a manipulative, prosecuting way, but rather in a manner wherein in questioning, man moves "into the open" and allows himself to be questioned in turn so that the opening question leads to a dialectic of question and answer as in a conversational dialogue or in the way an interpreter interrogates a text. In other words, being coming from man's future, addresses man in his present, and man in turn, starting with his present precomprehension of being as bequeathed by his traditional past, interrogates being and in so doing retraces his past and the past history of being, in the process questioning and being questioned by the past appearances or nonappearances of being, in order to arrive at a proper understanding of being appropriate to the present historical moment.

Here we see Heidegger's "hermeneutic circle."¹² As historical being whose very being is defined by his very relation to being, man's relation to being is ambiguous. In other words, being is always at one and the same time hidden and disclosed to man. In this sense, the question of being is never completely alien to man. Man, from the very beginning has a certain pre-comprehension of being. On the other hand, any progress in the hermeneutic of being does not bring up anything totally new, but

10. William Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger, Through Phenomenology*, pp. 434-36.

11. It has been the task of Hans-Georg Gadamer to develop Heidegger's notion of "hermeneutic" into a whole theory of philosophical hermeneutic in his major work *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960, 4th edition, 1975). *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

12. *Being and Time*, pp. 24-48.

rather an ever more original understanding of what was already there from the very beginning, and thus, as Plato would say, like a remembering, or as Heidegger would say,

. . . that weird (*unheimlich*) and yet friendly feeling that we have always already been who we are, that we are nothing but the unveiling of things decided upon long ago.¹³

Heidegger therefore sets about to question the "text," as it were, of Western thought in order to arrive at the more original questions that brought about Western tradition. This is what led Heidegger to the Pre-Socratics, dialoguing with whom he comes upon the original premetaphysical disclosure of being as *phusis* in Heraclitus,¹⁴ being as the ever emergent occurrence, or as Heidegger himself would say otherwise, *Ereignis*,¹⁵ the event of appropriation, by which being ap-propriates man in his present and man in turn appropriately measures up to the present demand of being. In this interrogation of the text of Heraclitus, Heidegger tells us, what is to be done is not simply to repeat what Heraclitus says, but to go to the very questions behind the text of Heraclitus and left unasked by him. In such manner then, the hermeneutic of being is both a retrieval and a creative repetition of the past.

In this coming to presence of being as *phusis*, primacy is restored to that which is becoming, to that which is in perpetual flux. Thus the search for the ground or the principle must give way to that which is in a sense groundless; the search for arche must yield to that which is an-archic presence. This transitory ever-in-flux *phusis*, it will be noted, is not completely amorphous. Being the historical moment, it represents a certain relational whole (*Bewandnisganzheit, Bedeutsamkeit*).¹⁶ It signifies then a "world," a certain structure of limitations and possibilities parti-

13. From Heidegger's lectures on Schelling as cited in the article by Robert S. Avens, "Heidegger and Archetypal Psychology," *International Philosophical Quarterly* (1982): 202.

14. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Anchor Books, Yale University Press, 1959) pp. 106-13.

15. See William J. Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger, Through Phenomenology*, p. 614.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-58.

cular to the historical moment. Man then must respond by his action *kata phusin*. The norm of good and evil would be *phusis* itself. To try to remove oneself from the demands of this transitory moment, to try to immobilize the flux of *phyein* would be *hubris* or the relapse to the hold of epochal or metaphysical principles.

At this point there may be enough indications for an ethic based on what has just been seen of the "hermeneutic of facticity." First, the ethical dimension of man would stem from the very openness of man to being, more precisely, to historical being, to *phusis* or *Ereignis*. This relation of man to being imposes on man a fundamental obligation, demands of him a response, on which will depend the very meaning of his existence and eventually of human history itself. The ground of moral obligation then is not man himself nor human reason nor human will but that which lies beyond man, namely being itself, the relation to which constitutes man's own being.

Since being is historical, man's relation to being is always a mixture of hiddenness and disclosure, man's response to being requires an interpretation, thus a hermeneutic of being, a hermeneutic of the historical situation. In this hermeneutic, as we have seen, man has to initiate a dialectical process of question and answer, wherein man, in initially questioning being, places himself in the open, thus allowing his initial position to be questioned in return in the face of the call of being for the historical moment.

Hence, in this hermeneutic of the historical situation, certain guiding principles are indicated, not however in the sense of *archaic* principles to serve as axioms from which specific rules of action are to be derived. They are simply guidelines to help us maintain our openness and docility to the historical moment which alone is the measure and the norm, thus, *kata phusin*.

Among these guiding principles are:

- a. There is need of a sense of generosity or self-renunciation by which one abstains from the will to power by which man tends to dominate and enframe the call of historical being. This principle would entail the searing task of critical reflection, and especially self-critical reflection regarding any narrowing of view or ideological reflexes or callousness of feeling that we may have built up with time.

- b. The response to historical being would signify a dialectic tension between a certain prevailing vision or precomprehension, thus a certain preexisting sense of the whole, and on the other hand, the actual structure of limitations and possibilities of the historical situation. In other words, moral reflection and action do not signify the mere applying of basic principles determinable independently of or ahead of the historical situation. Nor is it a simple matter of reconciling the conflict of two or more principles knowable by themselves independently of the situation. The moral situation, being historical is always an ambiguous situation, a mixture of hiddenness and disclosure, wherein what is needed is precisely to arrive at the concept or the principles by which to understand the situation and act according to its demands. Yet, both the concept and the situation, both the norm and the matter must be allowed to emerge from the historical situation itself. Thus, starting from a preexisting comprehension, a prevailing moral vision of the whole which man inherits from his past moral tradition, man interrogates the concrete possibilities and limitations of the historical situation and, in the process, both man's starting moral vision and the manner by which the situation presents itself undergo transformation. At the end of the process emerges a concrete world of relations claiming to be realized wherein man may dwell and come to himself.
- c. No moral reflection starts *tabula rasa*. No moral reflection grounds itself. Moral reflection is beholden to past tradition and its task is to continue what in a sense has always been by way of a continuous never closing circle of retrieval of that which offers itself as the ever more original in the past, or else as a creative repetition of the past in accordance with the claims of the present historical situation in view of the future.

It may very well be pointed out that in the end we seem to come back to saying that man and his possibilities are the norms of morality. It may well be, not however in the sense of man as foundational subjectivity or reason or will, but rather man precisely as *Da-Sein*, man as beholden to being and as messenger-interpreter of being, man whose fundamental moral obligation is to

respond to being as manifested in the historical Ereignis, and who in so acting thereby determines his own being and history.

Ad Heidegger himself says,

Only as a questioning, historical being does man come to himself; only as such is he a self. Man's selfhood means this: he must transform the being that discloses itself to him into history and bring himself to stand in it.¹⁷

17. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 121.