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Margins, Limits, Eccentricities: Two Illusions of Philosophy

Abstract: The purpose of this text is to analyze two illusions of philosophy: that of immediate knowledge and that of understanding the world as a whole. These two are placed in relation with the two meanings of the limit, the Aristotelian one and the one that is specific to Romanticism and Hegelianism: the limit that determines and individualizes, and the limit that envelops and legitimizes, respectively. The two illusions have been researched in several scenarios of modern philosophy and phenomenology in reference to the ideal of transparency and the one of the wholeness of knowledge. Their correction presupposes the assumption of an idea that is specific to hermeneutics, which Ricoeur so excellently expressed: the understanding of self implies a distancing from oneself, a detour through the world of signs, texts, symbols, history etc.

Keywords: transparency, immediacy, margins, limits, modern philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics

For a long while, philosophy has claimed to capture the world – especially its essence – directly. Both metaphysics and phenomenology claim direct access to things themselves. The temptation of immediate knowledge of the external world as well as the internal world is an old desire of philosophers. The method they often use is intuition under its various forms. Thus, philosophy aims to achieve a form of transparency of its research subjects. However, these are matters that are usually non-apparent: the transcendent, the absolute, that which surpasses any limit of the apparent world and of the human being. From this *hybris* of philosophers are born the most audacious philosophical systems, sprung from superhuman claims. In order to justify the ultimate evidence of their ideas on the great matters they approach, philosophers take on qualities that are beyond the human finitude: perfect intellect, a divine eye, flawless senses, infinite will, infallible (self) awareness.

This claim becomes problematic precisely when it is fully assumed, for example in the Hegelian system or in Husserlian phenomenology. Other times, such as with Descartes, the ideal of absolute certainty contains within itself negativity under various forms: the hyperbolic doubt, the hypothesis

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of the evil genius, the ego cogito – God axis, provisional morality or even the exercises of meditation and confession which accompany the rigorous endeavor of being uplifted to universal certainty.

This *hybris* therefore manifests itself in two directions: the temptation of immediate knowledge and the temptation of understanding the world as a whole. The first brings into play an Aristotelian meaning of the limit, that of individuation, of de-limitation, of de-finiteness, while the second references the Romantic meaning of the limit, which is the envelopment of the world in its entirety or of the wholeness of the ego (two wholes which are essentially the same for some Romantics but also to a few German idealists).

In a chapter of *Margins of philosophy*, Derrida also identifies two *types* which philosophy combines in various proportions when it masters the fields of science: hierarchy and envelopment. These two kinds of appropriating mastery are represented by Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger on the one hand, and Spinoza, Leibniz or Hegel, on the other hand. The deconstructive intent of Derrida is to find and inscribe into discourse marks which did not pertain to the area of philosophy, with which one may operate a shift of the manner in which philosophy uses these two types. For him, deconstruction is not an anti-philosophy, a direct critical discourse, a frontal, symmetrical contestation, an overthrow or an inversion of the initial framework, but a form of ambush, of textual manoeuvring through which an *oblique* critique is made. The philosophical ear must be moved or deformed obliquely in order to escape the vicious circle of philosophy, of this appropriating internalization of any margin or limit. An escape, as Derrida shows, to “mark a limit, a margin which philosophical discourse cannot infinitely reappropriate, conceive as its own, generating and internalizing beforehand the process of its own expropriation, thus proceeding to its inversion by itself” (Derrida 1982, 15-16).

The illusion of immediate knowledge

Let us now return to the temptation of the immediacy. Derrida is right to name this type a *hierarchy*. Philosophy has placed itself above positive sciences, which have a *positum*, like a discourse that claims to place and legitimize their objects of study. It does not have an object as such, but it deals with the conditions of possibility of all objects. Therefore, we have a hierarchy of research, which is founded by philosophy. In the past, hierarchy could signify both an order of realities and an order of the principles of knowledge. It could form itself into a continuous series, with a prime term that justifies all of its elements, but also as a discontinuity between their series and the first element, which is beyond all of the others.

The Aristotelian concept of limit comprises both situations. In *Metaphysics* (1022 a), the limit is defined as the end of a thing, which can constitute both the beginning and the end of the thing. Namely, the point of departure of the thing, but especially its final cause, its purpose. Alternatively, the end or extremity of a thing does not diminish its value, it does not lessen its being, but it is precisely this end or this extremity that gives that thing its existence, that determines it, it makes it be that which it is. Hence, the limit is the very essence of the thing, which is the border of the knowledge of the thing and, for this reason, the border of the thing as such (1022 a). Consequently, the most elevated significance of the limit is that of a principle, both in an ontological and epistemological sense. Thus, the limit marks the passage from indeterminacy to something determined, from indefinite to finite, hence the de-limitation, the acquirement of a determination. In other words, the limit means bringing something from non-being into being, giving something an identity, which makes it different from other things.

When it sets out to do so much, philosophy risks overextending itself. It surpasses its limits, manifesting a *hybris* that remains profoundly philosophical nevertheless. For the temptation of surpassing its limits is profoundly imprinted in the philosophical exercise, as a defining trait of man. In the history of thought, there are several situations where such a claim meets theology or, more generally, religion. Continuing Plato's thought, Neoplatonism imagined philosophy as epoptics, an ascension of the soul from the sensitive to the intelligible. Philosophy thus had to be a true spiritual exercise, one that prepares the soul towards the great leap, the merging with a divine One. By expressing a claim of such a magnitude, philosophy acknowledges its limits nonetheless, for the leap in itself – the ultimate moment of the spiritual trajectory – is no longer strictly philosophical, but mystical. Following this train of thought, Christian thought has discovered the distinction between revealed and philosophical theology. The first has access to the divine, while the latter works with the material offered by revelation. Thus, the ultimate truth is not philosophical, nor is it human, but it is offered in and through divine revelation.

As we can see, the idea of overcoming limits is complex. As the act of ego, the overcoming is always dependent on its intentionality, being inscribed in the horizon of possibility it opens. In other words, it is limited. In all such cases in the history of philosophy, the limit is understood starting with what is before it, without in fact indicating what is beyond, towards *the other*. The question that follows, then, is: is it possible to look at a limit from what is on the other side of it, from towards this *other*? In the twentieth century, this temptation was staged through a few radical philosophical gestures. Let us mention Heidegger's attempts to indicate the manner in which the being gives itself (*es gibt*), man being a mere receiver of

the call of the being. Or Levinas', who understands the infinite as being completely beyond the entirety of the world (which is why metaphysics surpasses ontology). Or the manner in which Marion invokes a new type of phenomenality, the donation, which is not the act of an ego or of a principle, the donation lacking something that is given, being nonetheless received and taken in by man, thought of as a « gifted » (*adonné*). Obviously, though, all these invocations of a look of the limit from beyond need a process of reaching that beyond. They therefore require some manners to transgress the enclosure into a whole from before the limit, because that is the only way in which one could situate oneself beyond and be able to watch (or listen) from that beyond. If Heidegger invokes affective dispositions which, once activated, pull us out from the middle of existence to install us into nothing, that is face to face with being (angst, but in some texts boredom or wonder), Marion appeals to the disposition of love.

An interesting application is made by Agamben in an interpretation of Kafka, where he invokes a strange character, the surveyor K (*kardo*). Although his usual role is to establish boundaries, he now takes by storm the last limit of the earth. The limit passes through each of us, like an unseen door. It consists of the boundary between men and divinity, which man himself has imposed. The surveyor abolishes boundaries that separate and at the same time unite the divine and the human, the high and the low, the castle and the village. Of course, one may wonder what kind of person is he who can do such a thing. Agamben tells us explicitly: the surveyor is *sacer* (Agamben 2008, 13-27).

But just as interesting are Cioran's remedies from the sphere of *negative exercises*, the initial title of *A Short History of Decay* (2012), his first book written in French, such as loneliness and isolation, failure, disintegration and self-ruin, insomnia and suicidal thoughts, the acceptance of the inner absurdity and of the presence of death in our every cell, the cultivation of sadness and suffering, boredom and superior indifference, aversion and bitterness (of which he writes in his second French book, published in 1952), the gift of tears and shuddering, illness, nausea, hatred or repulsion towards all that exists, delirium and madness, non-action and the joy of senselessness, in short, *damnation*. The metaphysical condition that is favorable to authenticity is that of being a stranger everywhere: "To be a *stranger* in any country, in any world: to elevate your legal state to a metaphysical quality" (*Ramblings*). When Nothing becomes the "supreme experiment", it actually becomes the *home* of he who experiences it. On the contrary, life, with its illusions, proves to be a place of exile. This reversal of the ordinary topology is foreshadowed by Cioran since his first book, *On the Heights of Despair*: "Can it really be that for us existence means exile, and nothingness, home?" (Cioran 1996, 106). Consequently, installing oneself

into Nothingness is Cioran's perpetual experience. It does not occur only once he changes the place he lives, nor does it even happen once he changes the language in which he writes, even though the latter is a decisive experience in his case. The topological inversion between *home* and *exile*, essentially a skeptical resignification of the fall, cannot be seen as such unless it is looked at from the horizon of Nothingness and from its direction.

Transparency and concealment

Ricoeur discovered that modern philosophy, as well as Husserlian phenomenology, both attached to the ideal of reflection, set in motion a will for absolute transparency, which is synonymous of a perfect coincidence of the self with itself. Having this ideal as its main assumption, modern thought has attempted to argue that the principle of all positive sciences is self-awareness, which would be an indubitable science, a certain foundation of all other sciences. Husserlian phenomenology also assumes this modern presupposition. According to Ricoeur, "phenomenology first of all, and then hermeneutics, continue to project onto an even more distant horizon" (Ricoeur 1991, 13). Husserl could not accomplish his dream either, and his phenomenology undermines, in various aspects, the pretension it claims. In this sense, Ricoeur shows that the project of Husserlian phenomenology of radical self-founding disintegrates through the very fact that describing the manners of formation of the meaning of things, manners which are called active syntheses, reveals the fact that the latter always lead to ever more radical passive syntheses. And in his latter works, dedicated to the concept of *Lebenswelt*, this is thought of as a "horizon of immediacy which is impossible to ever attain", therefore never given, but only presumed, which is why it is the "lost paradise of phenomenology". According to Ricoeur, philosophy must give up on the dream of total mediation, according to which the reflection would fully identify with intuition, allowing a complete self-transparency of a subject that, otherwise, can only be absolute. Hermeneutics stands precisely against this dream, which is essentially unattainable. It assumes "all the demands of this long detour", as Ricoeur calls it, that which happens through understanding and interpreting signs, symbols and texts.

In any hermeneutics there is a play of transparency and concealment, of truth and illusion. The attempts to deconstruct the illusions bring us one step closer to the truth. But they may just as well give birth to new illusions, to new idols which many people come to worship. For what appears as truth or evidence following a critical exercise – or hermeneutics of suspicion – proves to be, from another perspective and in the light of a new experience, a mere new illusion. Here are a few examples. The will to

power, the “truth” of Nietzschean genealogy, is a new idol. Just as the Freudian unconscious is also an idol. Or work for Marx, the Husserlian pure ego, the structures of language in (post)structuralism and even the Heideggerian finitude, mortality, which seemed like an ultimate given. Disclosures are nothing but an endless game of mirrors. By highlighting the uncertainties/ hidings/ illusions of self, critical projects such as genealogy, destruction, deconstruction etc. continue using the illusion of transparency, or at least feed on its crumbs, when it exercises its claim to highlight these layers or structures: power and the body, discourses and texts, history and tradition, culture and values, morals and policies, assumptions, beliefs or images.

The illusion of understanding the world as a whole

Let us dwell on the second illusion as well. The understanding of self implies a play of immanence and of transcendence. Man is a situated being. Every moment, he finds himself in the world, in history, in the whirlwind of life. He is carried by each of these totalities that precede him. Traditional philosophy would extract man from these wholes, missing his facticity. Understanding the individual through the whole is not just a figure of classical rhetoric, it is also a central idea of Romanticism and of classical German philosophy. For authors such as Franz von Baader, Hölderlin, or Novalis, all that is separate acquires its meaning only through integrating in the whole of which it is a part. This idea is borrowed from speculative mysticism, which invokes the desire to return, through a mystical union, to the divine unity (Meister Eckhart). The decisive experience is the nostalgia towards the whole. Novalis emphasizes that philosophy must be understood as a “longing for home”, the desire to be at home everywhere, to transpose ourselves into all that is foreign. Romantic hermeneutics projects are founded upon this idea. According to Schleiermacher, the understanding and interpretation of a discourse or a text take place through the reconstruction of the two wholes, that of the language and that of the author’s thoughts, the latter being understood through the rebuilding of the ideational history of the period in which the author wrote (Schleiermacher 1995, 77). And, through Hegel’s writings, an integrative model of hermeneutics is imposed. Any partial interpretation is contingent, only the self-explanation of speculative reason being true (Afloroaei 1997, 222-223). The mentioned scenarios therefore imply the possibility to surpass determined limits, their hermeneutical consequence being that the limits of the interpretation are those given by the whole.

With Nietzsche, Heidegger and their successors, another type of whole is rediscovered: the situation in the world, in history or in the

duration of life. Traditional philosophy, it has been said, thinks of man through ready-made theories or ideas. In other words, it does not have real access to it. Thinking it can reach man, it stops at certain images of him. The gaining of immanence and of the concrete, though, raises another question. Can we truly understand ourselves when we are captive in the world, in history, in the currents of life? The understanding of self claims a distance from oneself. Yet, the distance, such as that of reflexivity, also brings with it the risk of objectification, of the modification of the ego towards which the reflection is directed. Husserl falls into this trap; it has been said since Heidegger. If the reflexive (or epistemological) distance actually blocks our access to the ego, it seems like things can be corrected only if the distance modulates ontologically, being conceived as a self-transcendence. This was Heidegger's experience of thought. Self-transcendence takes place in the affective disposition of angst, caused by the being-towards-death (Heidegger 1972). This gives back the Dasein to itself. It rescues it from being seized in the middle of beings, by making it be seen as a pure possibility. Heidegger calls into play a complex tension between the immanence of the Dasein (its situation in the world and in history) and its transcendence. It reverberates on a new tension, between the desired self-transparency of man and the layers which mediate his access to himself.

This idea is continued with Gadamer (1990), including through the thematization of temporal distance, then it takes a different shape for Ricoeur, for whom the distance becomes a long, interpretative detour through the world of symbols, metaphors, works, texts etc. The ideal of self-transparency does not disappear, it is only postponed. The distance becomes intersubjective when public freedom is seen as coming first in relation to private freedom (Arendt 1958). It is the condition of possibility of interaction between humans, hence of public sphere. Last but not least, the distance becomes transcendence, in the highest meaning of the term, such as in the theological scenarios of French phenomenology (Levinas, Marion etc.). Now, the transcendent launches a call to the subject, asking it to call into question its false certainties. Here, the distance from self is no longer the result of an immanent effort, but it is the effect of a call from the other.

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