

The Event of Shame

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On the basis of scholarly and historical investigations that I have recently conducted concerning 19th and 20th century philosophers (in particular, Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty -- and Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze), I have been able to develop something like a philosophical task. The task is centered on four conceptual features that I have discovered in this group of philosophers. Here they are, presented in a systematic way: (1) the starting point in immanence -- where immanence is understood first as internal, subjective experience, but then, due to the universality of the epoché, immanence is understood as ungrounded experience; (2) difference -- where difference gives way to multiplicity, itself emancipated from an absolute origin and an absolute purpose; being so emancipated, multiplicity itself becomes the absolute; (3) thought -- where thought is understood as language liberated from the constraints of logic, and language is understood solely in terms of its own being, as indefinite continuous variation; and (4) the overcoming of metaphysics -- where metaphysics is understood as a mode of thinking based in presence, *and* overcoming is understood as the passage to a new mode of thought, that is, to a new people and a new land. You can see that with the first and the fourth features -- immanence and the overcoming of metaphysics -- the philosophical task that I tried to open up is based in the Nietzschean idea of the reversal of Platonism.

Of course, all of us know Nietzsche's simple definition of the reversal of Platonism. To reverse Platonism means that we value this world in itself, immanently, and no longer value it in relation to transcendent forms such as the Platonic idea of the good. In other words, the revaluation of existence means that existence is measured neither in terms of an origin from which existence might be said to have fallen nor in terms of an end toward which existence might be said to be advancing. More precisely, we must say that the reversal of Platonism means that the duration of existence has no beginning and it has no end. It has no primary origin and no ultimate destination. In the reversal, the time of duration becomes unlimited. While we start out from a well-known definition of the reversal of Platonism, we have end up in a complicated idea. The reversal of Platonism leads us to the idea of time imagined as a line that has no terminal points, a line that never bends itself back into a circle. It leads us to imagine time as an unlimited straight line. It seems to me that, despite all the philosophical reflections on time that have taken place across the 20th century, the implications of the idea of unlimited time (which is immanence itself) remain, at the least, undetermined, and, more likely, I think, the implications remain largely unknown. The philosophical task that I have opened up (for future work, and in particular in my next book which now carries the working title of *Is it Happening?*) therefore concerns first and foremost the determination of the implications of immanence.

I am not sure that I have determined and I am not sure that one is in fact able to determine **all** the implications of immanence. I am not even sure we are able to understand all the consequences of the implications that we are able to determine. Nevertheless, the set of implications that I think we can determine leads to a problem. In fact, it is this problem that really animate the project. Immanence implies that the reversal of Platonism does not merely concern an abstract problem in the history of philosophy. It also concerns a much more concrete and dangerous problem, which I have called (following certain ideas I have found in Derrida) "the problem of the worst."

The problem of the worst arises because the crucial implication of immanence is fundamental violence. The worst is a reaction to fundamental violence, a reaction that tends toward complete suicide. Yet, the worst reaction, the reaction of the worst violence arises because it thinks that it knows – it is Platonism personified – the best; it thinks it knows the principal origin and the ultimate purpose of life. However, as we shall see, the reaction of the worst violence does not really reach the most fundamental level. At the most fundamental level, we discover that we really do not know the answer to the question of what happened (no principal origin) and we do not know the answer to the question of what is going to happen (no ultimate purpose). In this more fundamental experience of absolute non-knowledge, the pain of this violence is most acute. And, insofar as we cannot really stop the violence, the experience of pain really amounts to us feeling shame, shame that we cannot stop ourselves from collaborating in the violence and shame in the face of those others who suffer that violence. It is this feeling of shame that motivates us not to react with the worst violence against the violence that cannot be reduced. Instead, shame motivates us to let that fundamental violence be. At bottom, after all, life is violence, and letting life be life is less bad than suicide. Letting life be life is less bad than no life at all.

So, the philosophical task I am envisioning really concerns the search for a solution to this problem of the worst violence, a solution I just outlined. As I said, in order to approach a solution to this problem of the worst violence, we would need to investigate, as thoroughly as possible, the implications of immanence. To do so, we would have to investigate, first of all, the experience of time, temporalization. If we pursued this investigation, we would see that Temporalization is a structure consisting of two contradictory forces: singularization and universalization. On the one hand, singularization forces a present moment, like the sharp point of sword, to insert itself into the flow of time. On the other hand, however, universalization forces the flow of time, like a charging army, to overrun the singularity of the moment. Time temporalizes or endures by means of the force of universalization and the force of singularization, the force of repetition and the force of event. These two elements of repetition (or universalization) and event (or singularization) are irreducibly connected to one another but without unification. In other words, these two forces are necessarily bound to one another and necessarily dis-unified or non-coincidental, cracked apart like a wound and yet linked together like a suture. The paradoxical relation of the two forces – the limit between them is essentially divisible -- implies that the self-relation (or the correlation) which temporalization makes possible is never simply “auto,” never simply the same; it implies that auto-affection is always at the same time, really and necessarily, hetero-affection. Thanks to the two forces of temporalization, immanence therefore dissolves into multiplicity; the inside is in the outside or the outside contaminates the inside; instead of an “I,” there is a “we” (but a necessarily incomplete “we”); and finally, instead of us thinking we have the power to hear ourselves speak (which is the very ground of autonomy), we find ourselves in an experience of inability. The necessity of these two forces is so strong that we are powerless not to obey their commands, even though their commands cannot be reconciled. Indeed, the experience we are describing is the experience of undecidability. How can we decide – and yet we must decide – when there is no choice but to singularize and to universalize? We must singularize and at the same time we must universalize. The fundamental struggle of the two forces internal to all experience amounts to an irremediable injustice or an irreducible violence, right in me. The violence is so intense that I find myself saying to myself “I am at war with myself.”

Now, this brief analysis of temporalization in terms of two irreducible forces has allowed us to see some of the implications of immanence: auto-affection is also necessarily hetero-affection; what looks unified is really a multiplicity; the outside is on the inside and vice versa; autonomy is entangled with heteronomy; power rests in powerlessness; and, most importantly, temporalization implies fundamental violence. In order to understand these implications more precisely and in order to understand the structure of temporalization that produces them, we would need to do more phenomenological work. If we did that phenomenological work, we would see many more implications of immanence unfold. We do not have the time today to do that work (although I have done some of that work and have catalogued several implications of immanence). Instead of doing that phenomenological work, I'd like to return to the problem of the worst, as I promised I would. The problem of the worst arises from this secret murmur within my interior monologue: "I am at war with myself." The question we must confront is: how should I react to this irremediable injustice, to this irreducible violence, to internal and endless war – and react without ending everything?

This question expresses the problem of the worst, and the solution, as I have already indicated, lies in the acute experience of shame. The acute experience of shame would lead one to change one's mode of behavior and thinking (as Spinoza knew). It would lead one to react differently to fundamental violence. Instead of the reaction (which is madness itself) of complete suppression and annihilation of the violence, one would through shame react with a freeing up of the violence, letting the violence be what it is or can be. In short, instead of a hyperbolic repression (apocalypse), the reaction would be a hyperbolic letting-be (*Gelassenheit*).

More, of course, needs to be said about this hyperbolic *Gelassenheit*, but, to conclude, I would like to add one more comment to what I just said about the philosophical task I am imagining. In the first conceptual feature – immanence – I mentioned in passing the universality of the epoche or what Husserl called "the phenomenological reduction." For me, the old (and maybe old-fashioned) method of the phenomenological reduction (and the epoche) play a critical role in the philosophical task I am imagining, and here I am using "critical" in both senses of the word, both as central and unavoidable, and as a form of criticism. I think the reduction is critical -- the theme of our workshop is critique – because of the reduction's universal status. Husserl thought that the reduction should reduce every mundane region of knowledge and experience. This universality of the reduction, it seems to me, is quite radical -- but necessary in order to break through all the kinds of dogmatism that we encounter in philosophy or in thinking generally today. For example, I think that the renewed attempt to think alongside of the natural sciences (including biology) is a form of dogmatism because this thinking remains restricted to one region of experience and knowledge, the region of nature. In other words, the philosophy of the natural sciences, being merely regional, remains mired in mundane modes of thinking and conceptuality. Or, to speak like Heidegger, it remains mired in ontic determinations and ontic modes of thinking. Or, to speak like Heidegger and to be more controversial, "science does not think." For me, what Husserl opened up with the phenomenological reduction amounts to the only way to begin to think, and indeed, to begin to think in new ways. The phenomenological reduction is necessary in order to create new concepts, even new concepts that are not phenomenological or beyond phenomenology. For me, there is no other way to philosophize.

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