

Afterword

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As Paul Fairfield very pertinently remarks in the Introduction to this issue, "Thinking the death of metaphysics and the consequences of its demise for practical philosophy is an enterprise that has inspired some of the most important philosophical efforts of the past century." Postmodernism is the term that, for better or worse, has come to stand as a coverall designation for what Fairfield refers to as the "death of metaphysics." The postmodern attempt to "overcome metaphysics," as Heidegger would say, coincides to a large extent with the history of the phenomenological movement. The beginning of the end of philosophical modernism is indeed to be found in Husserl's bracketing (by means of the celebrated phenomenological reduction) of the epistemologically-centered problematics of modern philosophy, chief among which was the problem of the so-called "external world." As an attempt to deconstruct the modern metaphysical dichotomy between the "inner" and the "outer"—consciousness and world, the subjective and the objective—Husserl's phenomenology represents a decisive "departure from those traditions which are determinative for modern thought and a breaking into a new basis for reflection," as one of Husserl's late assistants, Ludwig Landgrebe, very perceptively noted. What Heidegger would refer to as the "end of metaphysics," Landgrebe observes, is something that was effectively, if unwittingly, brought about by Husserl himself in the course of his attempt to overcome the dead-ends of modern philosophy through the working out of a metaphysically presuppositionless, philosophical science. Husserl's phenomenological project—the systematic abandonment of metaphysical speculation in an effort to return to the things themselves—effectively spells the "death of metaphysics." As Landgrebe remarks, "metaphysics takes its departure behind Husserl's back." As he further observes: "One can state quite frankly that this work [*First Philosophy*] is the end of metaphysics in the sense that after it any further advance along the concepts and paths of thought from which metaphysics seeks forcefully to extract the most extreme possibilities is no longer possible."¹

The history of the phenomenological movement after Husserl is an attempt—or, rather, a whole host of diverse attempts on the part of various thinkers—to draw the ultimate consequences from Husserl's own reduction of the problematics of modern philosophy. From Heidegger to Habermas and from Merleau-Ponty to Derrida, thinkers working out of the tradition inaugurated by Husserl have sought, in one way or another, to dissect or deconstruct the "metaphysics of presence" (as Derrida has so aptly called it) that still lingers on in Husserl's attempt at elaborating an apodictic science based on the immediate givens of consciousness—what Husserl

referred to as the "sphere of immanence" (or "ownness"). Accordingly, one of the most salient features of this postmodern critique of philosophical modernism has been the critique of what has come to be called the "philosophy of consciousness" or the "philosophy of the subject"—a critique of what Habermas refers to as "a self-sufficient subjectivity that is posited absolutely,"² or what Ricoeur, with reference to Husserl, calls "the intuitionism of a philosophy founded on the *cogito*, with its claim to constitute itself in self-sufficiency and consistency."³ The death of metaphysics (the "death of God," as Nietzsche referred to it) signals the death of the atomistic, monological subject of modern philosophy.

In the latter part of the twentieth century the critique of the modernist notion of the subject assumed different forms, and these different forms have come to be definitive of two very different sorts of philosophical postmodernism (it is not even clear that one of these can, any longer, properly be called "philosophical"). By way of a rough designation, these two different forms—or "strains," as Fairfield says—of postmodernism could be labeled, on the one hand, "hermeneutical" and, on the other, "poststructuralist." One of the more noteworthy instances of the former current in postmodern thought is the resolute attempt that Ricoeur has made throughout his career to widen out and deepen Husserl's philosophy of consciousness in such a way as to redefine radically (or, as Calvin Schrag would say, "reconfigure") the very notion of the subject—in effect (though this is not a term Ricoeur would employ), to "demetaphysicize" it.⁴ A good illustration of the altogether different, poststructuralist way of dealing with the subject is the way in which Roland Barthes quite simply proclaimed its "death." The subject or the "author"—the *I*—Barthes said, is *nothing but* "the instance of saying *I*," and this subject is "empty outside the very enunciation which defines it."⁵ For his part, Foucault informed us around about the same time of the death of "man." "Man," he said, is "an invention of recent date," and is "in the process of disappearing," of being "erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."⁶ Thus, if hermeneutics has painstakingly attempted to *reconstruct*—in a conscientiously *postmetaphysical* way—the notion of the subject, has attempted, as it were, to endow it with real flesh, poststructuralism has, in a merely *antimetaphysical* fashion, sought simply to *deconstruct* it, to empty it of reality.

Indeed, the very notion of "reality," some of the more deconstructionist postmoderns have claimed, is nothing more than a *simulacrum*, the greatest of all metaphysical illusions. The all-pervasive influence of Nietzsche is fully in evidence here. "One simply lacks any reason," Nietzsche had said, "for convincing oneself that there is a *true* world."⁷ By now it has become a commonplace in many postmodern circles that all claims to knowledge are

nothing more than "local narratives" incapable of laying legitimate claim to universal truth-value. All knowledge, it is said, is biased, context-dependent, and subjective—little more than a kind of idiosyncratic story-telling. "Reality," the supposed object of "knowledge," is nothing more than a semantic or social construct, and is thus thoroughly relative to a multitude of miscellaneous language games.

The death of metaphysics, spelling, as it does for these postmoderns, the death not only of "the subject" but of "reality" and "truth" as well, necessarily also spells the *end of philosophy* itself—since philosophy in its historical essence has always been the search for a true understanding of what is, of self and world. In this connection, the end of "man," Foucault had said, coincides with the rise of "language." Indeed, for many postmoderns, philosophy can no longer claim any special status; it is simply one form of what Barthes called "literature," by which he meant a language which says nothing other than itself, which is dense and opaque, and which expresses neither "facts" nor "thought" nor "truth." After the death of metaphysics, philosophy can be no more than, in the words of Richard Rorty, "a kind of writing" and the philosopher nothing more than an "intellectual dilettante" or "kibitzer."⁸

Given the conflicting ways in which postmoderns have responded to the death or end of metaphysics, this end is a decidedly *ambiguous* one. It is not as yet clear just what has ended with the end of metaphysics. While there can be no doubt that many of the deconstructions of modernism point only in the direction of relativism and, even more, of nihilism—the very nihilism prophesied by Nietzsche—it is not at all evident that abandoning metaphysics need entail a wholesale relinquishment of philosophy's core notions of truth and reality. While the death of metaphysics most assuredly does mean that philosophy must renounce its age-old quest for a definitive knowledge (*scientia*) of things, this need not mean—indeed, must not be taken to mean—that it must also thereby relinquish its quest for *meaning* or, as Ricoeur calls it, its "postulate of meaningfulness"—although such a quest must forever remain metaphysically foundationless and can only be, as Ricoeur says, an existential wager.

Thus, any serious attempt at pursuing the *Dao* of philosophy after the bankruptcy of modern metaphysics must involve a rigorous attempt at determining what does and what does not end with the end of metaphysics. The struggle for philosophical enlightenment (or, at the very least, disillusionment) must, in other words, involve a careful *working through* (in the Freudian sense) the implications of the death of modernism, as well as a resolute *working out* of a decidedly postmetaphysical and postfoundational way of bringing to reflective awareness that which calls forth

philosophical reflection in the first place: the enigma of our own being-in-the-world. As Charles Taylor remarks in this regard:

For all its radical break with the tradition, this kind of philosophy would in one respect be in continuity with it. It would be carrying further the demand for self-clarity about our nature as knowing agents, by adopting a better and more critically defensible notion of what this entails. Instead of searching for an impossible foundational justification of knowledge..., we would now conceive this self-understanding as awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing, an awareness that would help us to overcome the illusions of disengagement and atomic individuality that are constantly being generated by a civilization founded on mobility and instrumental reason.

As Taylor goes on to say, with reference to Husserl, "[w]e could understand this as carrying the project of modern reason, even of 'self-responsible' reason, farther by giving it a new meaning."⁹

As Fairfield remarks in his Introduction, this is the *Denkweg* that for my part I have sought to pursue; it is indeed the *Dao* I have been pursuing since my early work on Merleau-Ponty. It is by no means, however, one I have pursued in isolation. I am, of course, entirely indebted to the teachers I have had along the way, in particular to Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. To them I owe an inestimable degree of gratitude for providing me with the inspiration that was decisive for my own thinking, as well as for the wholehearted encouragement and recognition they extended to me. I am indebted in an incalculable way to the outstanding community of inquirers scattered throughout the world with whom I have had the honor of having been associated. A number of these coworkers in the field of *die Sachen selbst* have come together at the invitation of Paul Fairfield to present me with these "acts of friendship." To them all—colleagues, associates, former students, former fellow students—I express my heartfelt thanks. The gift of friendship that these texts represent—the "virtual" community they speak for—is what has largely sustained me throughout my many years of living in a philosophical wilderness.

Pace Descartes, the path of thinking is not something one pursues as an isolated subjectivity, a *solus ipse*. Even in the isolation of his stone tower in the provinces, Montaigne was not alone when he sought to reflect on the human condition. Thinking or reflection—the exercise of reason, the "inner dialogue"—is not a private soliloquy, but is inextricably part of an interpersonal dialogue, of the "conversation that we are." As Josiah Royce once remarked, just as "a genuinely and loyally united community ... is in a

perfectly [literal] sense a person," so also "any human individual person, in a perfectly literal sense, is a community ... a Community of Interpretation."¹⁰

The community of interpretation to which the acts of friendship gathered together in this issue attest is not, to be sure, of the sort that Husserl envisages in a rather positivist fashion. It is not a closely knit community based on a hierarchical division of labor with different researchers pursuing in a commonly defined, collaborative effort a set of interrelated tasks in such a way as little by little to fill in the blanks of an all-embracing, systematic science. Although Husserl had no doubt that consciousness (the "life of humankind") displays a "primordial teleo-logical-tendential structure in a directedness towards disclosure [i.e., truth],"¹¹ he was, of course, not nearly as naive in this regard as the positivists themselves who thought that it would only be a matter of time before they could fashion a value-free Unified Science. Husserl well knew that the pursuit of philosophical knowledge must necessarily be an "endless task," one stretching into infinity. In any event (and much to Husserl's chagrin), dissent and diversity ("difference") have been hallmarks of the phenomenological movement from the beginning. In North America, what used to be known simply as "phenomenology and existentialism" is now part of a wider, more diffuse, current of thought generally referred to—for lack of a better term—as "Continental philosophy." Decentered and "rhizomatic" though this community may be, it does retain a phenomenological core, this "core" being, as in the case of the contributors to this volume, a common concern in regard to their own fields of investigation to achieve a better understanding of the issues themselves, that is, the realm of human praxis and being-in-the-world. What binds the members of this particular community together is a common commitment to phenomenological "radicalism," a commonly shared attempt to eschew the sterile formalism that afflicts so much of contemporary thought, philosophy in particular, and, as Merleau-Ponty would say, "to sustain through contact with beings and the exploration of the regions of Being the same attention to what is fundamental [*le fondementale*] that remains the privilege and the task of philosophy."¹² That remains so even—if not especially—after the death of metaphysics.

The common task of this richly diverse community of interpretation is above all the ethical-practical one prescribed by the Delphic-Socratic injunction, *Know thyself!* It is the Husserlian or phenomenological task of "self-responsible" reason, of theoretically and practically responsible philosophizing. It is thus a task that is less "epistemological" than *ethical*. As one of the great moral philosophers, Blaise Pascal, says in the course of his phenomenological reflections on the human condition, because we, unlike the things of nature, are self-reflective beings, "all our dignity

consists in thought." From which he concludes: "Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality."¹³ The ancient Confucian moralists had said much the same with their notions of humanness (*ren*), heart or mind (*xin*), and duty or propriety (*yi*). As Xunzi (Hsün Tzu) asserted in the third century B.C.E. in a way reminiscent of Protagoras, while human beings are not "good" by nature, they do have within their nature a "germ of morality" that can be cultivated by "thinking" and "conscious exertion" in such a way as to enable them to become genuinely human. Being human (*zuoren*) is not a metaphysical given; it is an ethical-political imperative.

To adhere to the basic principle of morality and to follow the *Dao* of thought or reason involves, as Taylor says, the task of conceiving the self-understanding that we are "as awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing." In short, the task of thinking is, in the words of F. Couturier, the task of "bringing to consciousness the human finitude that is called to the historical 'infinite' of questioning and interpreting."¹⁴ This is a task that imposes itself on all existing human beings, and it is consequently one that attests to philosophy's universal vocation as well as its universal responsibility to a humanity that has now come to know itself reflexively *as such* and is now embarked on a common, global adventure.

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Notes

1. See Ludwig Landgrebe, "Husserl's Departure from Cartesianism" in R. O. Eleveon, ed., *The Phenomenology of Husserl* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 260, 261. Landgrebe states that Husserl's departure from, or abandonment of, Cartesian modernity was "a reluctant departure insofar as Husserl had wished to complete and fulfill this tradition without knowing to what extent his attempt served to break up this tradition."
2. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 41–2.
3. See Paul Ricoeur, *Main Trends in Philosophy* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 369.
4. Although his post-Husserlian, hermeneutical project has been as post-metaphysical as any, Ricoeur, with his customary caution, has resisted speaking of the "end of metaphysics"; see Ricoeur, "Reply to G. B. Madison"

- in L.E. Hahn, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 22) (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).
5. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 145.
 6. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 385–7.
 7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 3.
 8. See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida" in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
 9. Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology" in K. Baynes, et al., eds., *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 479–80.
 10. Royce to Mary W. Calkins, March 20, 1916; quoted in Milton Singer, *Man's Glassy Essence: Explorations in Semiotic Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 94.
 11. See Husserl, "Transcendental Phenomenology and the Way Through the Science of Phenomenological Psychology" (*Encyclopedia Britannica* article [1927]) in D. Welton, ed., *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 334.
 12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952–1960*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 112.
 13. Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailshiemer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), no. 200, 95.

14. F. Couturier, review of G. B. Madison, *Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis* in *Canadian Philosophical Reviews* 3, no. 2/3, 84.