Deconstructing the “Contemporal Moment”: New Horizons in the History of Philosophy

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The contemporal moment: destruction/deconstruction

It is obvious that the history of philosophy must be studied by determining a starting point beforehand. It seems a matter of course that we would automatically take such to be the contemporal moment. The contemporal moment means the “here and now”, hic et nunc. This moment acts as our starting position, as our “observatory point” from which we can survey philosophy as the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy thus unfolds in our direction, towards us. This concerns both time and place: philosophy is historically situated between its “sources” (for example, the pre-Socratics) and the situation in the 21st century (in its philosophical self-reflection). As a rule, this temporal vector is more or less reflexive, hence why the main (axial) discipline in all sectors of philosophy is the history of philosophy. By virtue of fixating on this historico-philosophical vector, we acquire the possibility to be involved in this process, to consolidate our own position as that of a “philosopher” in a historico-philosophical structure. This is the nunc, the “now”, the temporal sector in which our thinking is placed, if it wants to be “philosophical.”

Hence follows the rather important conclusion that was fully drawn between Heidegger and his call for “phenomenological destruction” in Sein und Zeit [1], and Jacques Derrida who developed this thesis into the methodology of “deconstruction” [2]. The history of philosophy, according to Heidegger, is tethered in his case to ontology, to the question of being, and, thereby being an onto-history, Seynsgeshichtliche, is a continuity of stages at each of which the question of being is treated uniquely. As follows, the history of philosophy is a logical structure or a series of logical structures which can be more or less described in ontological terms which in turn determine the place and significance of a philosophy or philosophical school in the overall historico-philosophical process. Determining a philosopher or school’s place in this continuity, which has strict temporal and cultural frameworks (from the pre-Socratics to Nietzsche to Heidegger himself), is equivalent to correctly understanding their philosophy and, accordingly, allows for the meaning of such to be revealed. This is ontological destruction – the placement of a philosopher or philosophical tendency through the revelation of the fundamental paradigm of their ontological positions (often hidden, veiled, or implicit) in a strictly notional sequence:

The First Beginning (pre-Socratics) -> The End of the First Beginning (Plato and Aristotle) -> the middle – the Middle Ages (Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, etc.) -> The Beginning of the End – New Time (modernity – Descartes, Leibniz, and up to Kant) -> The End of the End (Hegel and Nietzsche).

Destruction is the placement of a philosopher into this sequence in order to reveal his place in the history of philosophy, and thus the meaning of his philosophizing.

For Jacques Derrida, the history of philosophy is a text, the structure of which is determined by the intersections of semantic lines. This is a view which more or less repeats, albeit in nuanced and detailed form, Heidegger’s axial construction. Thus, for both Heidegger and Derrida, it is important to place a philosopher in the context in which the semantics of his constructs are found to represent quotations, polemics, or the overturning or reproduction of the discourses that are at disposal before and around him in the “grammatological fabric.” In this case, deconstruction is the attentive inspection of this fabric’s patterns, in which any “authorship” is conceived as no more than a locus of quotations compiled in an ordered manner. Philosophy, thus, is one field of connotation, and its history comprises changes in the predominant connotative matrices and interpretive algorithms. Between Heidegger and Derrida, we can place Michel Foucault and his epistemology.

Of course, such hermeneutical models of the history of philosophy distinctly crystallized around the end of the 20th century. In the 19th century, and earlier, the “contemporal moment” was described in other terms. For Kant, it was paired with the revelation of the structures of “transcendental reason”, for Hegel such was the “end of history” and the “objective spirit.” For Nietzsche, there was the maximization of the will to power in the figure of the Übermensch. In Marx, there was the horizon of the world proletarian revolution. In all cases, philosophy has been conceived exclusively as a teleological process – whether by those who have tried to give this teleology fixed forms, or those who, on the contrary, have understood history as the accumulation of a “quantity” of individual freedom (Stirner, Bergson or von Hayek/Popper).

For all of these teleologies – both the naive ones of the 19th century and those 20th century theories based on critical reflection, structuralism, and phenomenological corrections (as well as the philosophy of language and psychoanalysis) – the “contemporal moment” serves as an “observatory point”, and he who stands at this observatory point and has considered the content of the moment itself and its structures (no matter who this “someone” might be – the subject, Dasein, a rhizome, a deciphering system, a “body without organs”, a hermeneutic) is the key to the history of philosophy capable of interpreting it in relation to themselves. This is very important, since in such a perspective any preceding “contemporal moment” is conceived as a “preliminary”, “unfinished”, “incomplete” one compared to the current contemporal moment and, as follows, the nunc cannot be adequately described prius, as it does not convert into the past the “contemporality” of the present. In a certain sense, this is history as such, and the history of philosophy is the philosophical conceptualization of its structure.

The French philosopher Henry Corbin used the neologism historial in order to translate the meaning of Heidegger’s expression Seynsgeshichtliche (“onto-historical”) into French. The historial is the structure of the “contemporal moment” which predetermines its content as a teleological vector whose tip points to the nunc and presumes its beginning in the embryonic formation of the Logos.

In one way or another, any attempt to conceptualize the moments in the history of philosophy (of individual philosophers or their schools) beyond the historial, i.e., without deconstruction taking into account such explicit and convincing reflections (phenomenology, Heidegger, Post-Modernity), will look not simply naive, but ludicrous. In the context of the historial, any attempt to read Plato or Hegel outside of their notional sequence, which was in one way or another noted by philosophers in the last quarter of the 20th century, would mean falling into the self-deceit of unreflexive and unstructured quoting with a guaranteed loss of semantic links. If a reading of this or that philosopher does not flow in the context of this historico-philosophical grille de la lecture, i.e., without a thorough review of this observatory point where it is situated – or, in other words, on the other end of destruction/deconstruction operations – then nonsense is guaranteed. Not a single expression, not a single review, not a single intellectual procedure stands a chance at being correctly conceptualized, and instead of philosophy and the history of philosophy, we are left with the “white noise” of gloomy cognition, a simulacrum of thinking.

This is first and foremost the case with the nunc, the historial, or the temporal aspect of philosophy. The matter stands somewhat differently with the spatial aspect, the hic.

The topos of the present: the West as a spatial telos

The contemporal moment is situated not only in a temporal sequence, but also in space, on a scale of synchronic territory. If modern philosophy has devoted enormous, if not all of its attention to the first aspect of the contemporal moment, then spatiality has been left outside of the sphere of interests. Western philosophy is wholly and completely “tempo-centric.” Consequently, in it Sein is bound to Zeit, and this bondage is absolute, as a result of which Raum, or space, is studied merely as a residual principle, as an accident. Kant placed space closer to the object; Descartes altogether identified the object with “extense” (res extensa) in contrast to the subject (res cogens). In new European philosophy, thought is the property of the subject; consequently, time is the basis of philosophy and its context. Hence the historial as a measure.

It is telling that even critiques of the structuralists’ historico-philosophical understanding have by almost no means whatsoever addressed the fate of space in philosophy and philosophical self-reflection. The principle of “spatiality” has been integrated in the form of a synchronic topology intended to serve as a semantic scale for interpreting the content of time. In other words, structuralist topology only serves the historial in the spirit of the Heideggerian sequence or Derrida’s grammatological field.

But if we upset the habitual frameworks of new European philosophy and nevertheless pose the question of “where?” with regards to the observatory point, and if we fix the hic in the famous expression hic et nunc, then we have a specific civilizational concept of the West. The West in this case strictly fulfills the same teleological function as the “now.” The contemporal moment is situated in the West, and is the point towards which all the rays of possible thinking converge, thus achieving their epiphany in none other than the West. The West is the birthplace of the Logos; the Logos is itself in the “evening land”, Hesper, Abendland. This was more or less obvious for the cultural ethnocentrism of the Greeks. It was the core of the Romans’ legal and political self-consciousness, and it became the axis of ecumenism. Then it was incarnated in the concept of universal progress in modernity. It remains the main driving force of the processes of globalization.

Husserl spoke of “European humanity” as a philosophical quintessence of the human as such. Heidegger directly and explicitly equated philosophy with Europe.

The West is the telos of earthly space just as the present is the telos of the past. Thus, “modern” philosophy can only be Western philosophy, and just as the present is the essence of the past, so is the Western the essence of the non-Western. Between nunc and hic there is thus present a direct analogy: time (the historial, or Karl Jaspers’ axial time) convenes in the “now” and space in the “here”, interpreted as “here in the West.” And in precisely the same way that the past is conceived as the not-yet-present, so is the non-Western (for example, the eastern) thought of as the not-yet-Western.

This Western European, spatio-teleological character of the contemporal moment is conceptualized much less distinctly than the historial and the structures of the history of philosophy. Unlike the paramount discipline that is philosophy which deals with the deconstruction of time, spatial correctives and schematizations are the prerogative of the applied, secondary, and even barely institutionalized sciences with weakly developed philosophical apparatuses, such as geopolitics or international relations. On a more serious level, only the first attempts have been made at relativizing the Eurocentrism of modern philosophy as such, as with Edward Said’s introduction of the notion of “orientalism” or the more foundational but not so generalized studies of cultural, social, and structural anthropology.

It is none other than the West for which the absolutization of time and radical tempo-centrism are characteristic. In reducing the historial to a structure, something constructed, and departing from the present, we automatically produce a concentric model of civilizational space in which the West is situated in the center and all the rest of humanity is in the periphery.

Just as attempting to read this or that philosopher in isolation from the historial (without deconstruction and, consequently, beyond the contemporal grille de la lecture) is today philosophical nonsense, the same status is held by all those attempts at substantiating the relevance of non-Western forms of philosophy – in the best cases, they can be examined as extravaganza, and in the worst as obtrusive attempts by ignoramuses to force themselves upon a scientific problem on equal terms with the opinion of a scholar. What can a not-yet-Logos tell a Logos that the Logos itself does not know?

Thus we have ascertained the structure of the contemporal moment as analyzed from a temporal and spatial point of view.

Post-Modernity and distance

In the structure of post-modern philosophy, the historial is subject to steadfast analysis, and at times this attention is so detailed that the spatial aspect and characteristic Eurocentrism of Western philosophy also come into view. Combined with an anthropological approach, this yields definite preconditions for not only recognizing the structure of the observatory point as such, but also establishing a certain distance from it. The intensive reflections of post-Heideggerian (post-modern) philosophy on the nature of time, and the first glimpses into conceptualizing the spatial situation of contemporality bring us to an entirely new horizon and radically deeper level of philosophical self-reflection. What if the very observatory point from which we survey the history of philosophy, and from departing which we engage in deconstruction, is in turn nothing more than a “philosophical construct?” In other words, to what extent is the very idea of the teleology of the present moment qualified, and as follows, is tempo-centrism justified? Is the historial that serves us as a reliable tool for interpreting philosophy in turn an ephemeral and non-historical paradigm projected into the present which is not cumulative-teleological (regarding content), but arbitrary or arranged in accordance with a mechanism different from the vector of “axial time?” Finally, is the West the “only place” of the Logos, the zone towards which converge the rays of consciousness, or is this only one of many spatial receptacles of thinking alongside others? Does this mean that Eurocentrism is justified at its heart, and does it not follow that we should look for other, uniquely fully-fledged and complete dialects of the Logos?

These suspicions, of course, are left in the periphery of the philosophy of Post-Modernity, in the shadow of more habitual, inertial trends which, although are enriched, detailed, and introspective procedures, perpetuate the “dogmatic” vector of classical Western rationalism. Post-Modernity usually justifies and substantiates itself with routine practices of the contemporal moment, but the post-modern attitude nevertheless makes such suspicions and conjectures wholly natural. This inspires among those most of all worried about the possibility of breaking with the traditions of Western Modernity rather natural concerns: will Post-Modernity not altogether lead to the liquidation of the fulcra of the Western European Logos as such? If distance from the contemporal moment itself might be, even if only theoretically, justifiable, then all the claims of Western European humanity to universality immediately crumble, and this means no more nor less than the collapse of the Logos. Heidegger clearly recognized this prospect and posited that, nonetheless, the West’s teleology and contemporal moment, exposed to nihilistic catastrophe, should and could be overcome only through this moment and only in the West. This proposal consisted not in retreating from the observatory point, but in deepening the bottomless of its fall in order to, in this dramatic collapse, discover the mystery of its meaning and soar up to thrust forth Another Beginning for philosophy. Heidegger deliberately interpreted the shadow unleashed by Post-Modernity as a refusal of the burden of the “difficult knowledge of nihilism.” The decline of Europe, according to Heidegger, is the decline of being itself, and it should be experienced as such.

In post-Heideggerian philosophy, Heidegger’s tragism and heroism were rather quickly adapted into the routine of the new methodology; the anti-technological call to recognize the bottomless nothingness of such in turn became a technology. But postmodernism, albeit vapid and dubious, perhaps even by virtue of its refusal to sink deeper into the dizzying passivity of desperate Heideggerian nihilism, and at the same time not being in any position to turn Dasein’s mode of existence into authenticity (denying the Decision, Entscheidung), nevertheless slightly opened up the possibility for a step in this direction. If the Logos of the West, as far as one can tell, did not accept the Heideggerian invitation to implode, to explode in its own night, then in the very least it dissipated into bits of postmodern miasma and prepared for the last figure of dissolution. The fixation of distance with regards to the moment of contemporality and the clear and intelligible understanding of its “arbitrariness” (in spatial and temporal senses) is already the fait accompli end of the West, its philosophical end. For those for whom the telos of the historial was the only permissible “lifeworld”, this meant the “end of everything.” But here is where the most significant aspect manifests itself: what if the historial, with its fundamental tempo-centrism and concomitant Eurocentrism, with the structure of its Logos and grating deconstruction/ontological destruction, is but one among numerous and equivalent possibilities for reasonably organizing the world? If this is so, then the finale experienced by Western philosophy is no more than an episode in a more complex and multipolar philosophical picture where there might be multiple observatory points and multiple understandings of time, space, and Logos.

Post-Modernity as a whole, of course, does not gravitate in this direction, remaining as it has under the wonted hypnosis of its Eurocentric contemporality, but the distance in question here becomes an open possibility with the dissipation of the European Logos. In Post-Modernity, the structures of this Logos become so blurred and scattered, so unintelligible and weak, that breaking with their suggestiveness turns out to be an extremely easy endeavor. That the strength of this Logos’ inertia is such that the clutch of its impact on the people of the West themselves does not let up even when the nature of rationality itself withers and dissipates in front of their very eyes – that is another matter altogether. The ends no longer come together and liberation from dogma leads to liberation from the process of liberation by virtue of which the subject itself evaporates – after all, Post-Modernity recognizes not only God, but man himself as an “apparatus of suppression”, a “repressive machine”, and thus the freedom of man transforms into freedom from man. This is the logical result. It is a paradox, but today higher humanism means dehumanization or transhumanization. Tragedy thus imperceptibly slips into farce.

Simply stepping away from the observatory point becomes a simple endeavor only for those capable of digressing from the residual hypnosis of the historial, which means that it is by no means simple. Nonetheless, the philosophical space for this has been prepared, and if the distance which we have been discussing is taken as the object of our heightened attention, then we can rather easily differentiate a spectrum of philosophical procedures with which we can feel out a different fulcrum or even a whole constellation of such fulcra in order to, departing from it/them, observe and subject the contemporal moment to deconstruction, thus demolishing the ponderability of temporal and spatial teleology, i.e., the Western Logos’ claims to exclusivity.

Hence the proposal to move in the direction of this new distance and new fulcra, and let the dead bury their dead.

The phenomenology of philosophy as a method

How can this distance be embodied in philosophical practice? Theoretically, the most principled manner is to escape the hypnosis of the contemporal moment, to calmly and with complete self-control refuse the pressure posed by both the historial (the trajectory of the history of philosophy towards the point at which we find ourselves on the scale of historical temporality) and Eurocentrism. To this end, philosophy can be seized through several strategies:

the phenomenological

the anthropological

the Traditionalist

Surely there are other ways by which to resolve this issue, but for now we limit ourselves to these three trajectories. Let us begin with phenomenology. The phenomenologist philosophers, setting before themselves the goal of clarifying the structure of the processes of logical thinking at the first stage, that preceding the engagement of properly logical (in the spirit of Aristotle) procedures of reasoning, transitioned from revealing the nature of intentionality (Brentano) to the concepts of noesis or noema and the “lifeworld” (Husserl). This line was picked up and developed in a particularly original manner by early Heidegger, as a result of which he arrived at Dasein. Phenomenology proposes that we focus our attention on studying the structures of thinking in their pre-logical phases, when consciousness “naively” and “uncritically” operates with its own “representations” (Vorstellungen), by substituting the objects themselves theoretically outside of the subject with the corresponding noema inhabiting consciousness. This logic is constructed upon ascertaining the obvious (evidential) ostensibility of the object, thus as a matter of course accomplishing the step of transcendentalizing. At the heart of this process lies phenomenality itself, on which consciousness usually does not fixate as it instantly flies above this level. However, in phenomenologists’ opinion, it is none other than this phenomenality which is the most authentic and evidential state, and all other procedures of consciousness, including rational logic, are built on top of such with a greater or lesser degree of self-reflection. Thus, in order to achieve a precise and scientifically credible tracing of the basic processes of gnosiology on which thinking, logic, philosophy and science are built, it is necessary to intentionally study the phenomenal level which affects all other stages, hiding under their complexity and thereby dimming clear representations of nature and basic trajectories of thought.

The phenomenological method has been borrowed by the most diverse humanitarian disciplines from sociology to anthropology and psychology. Everywhere where it has been employed, the point has been explaining the arrangement and mechanisms of those structures on a level lesser and more primordial than that of logical thinking. Heidegger constructed his existential analytics on this basis.

In the field of the history of religions, the phenomenological method was actively used by Henry Corbin, who argued that religious doctrines cannot be understood on the grounds of purely, rationally formulated theological dogma and doctrines or by ignoring the inner experience of religious life. It is precisely studying this experience, which may very well contradict our ideas about the structure of the real, possible, and actual, that only can and should construe more complex religious systems. If we ignore this “lifeworld” of the religious person, then our understanding of religious doctrine will be superficial and completely incorrect. After all, we would miss the main and most essential foundation, that upon which such doctrine is built and whose structures it produces (whether revealing or, on the contrary, veiling them). Therefore, Corbin, who studied Islamic mysticism and Iranian Shi’ism in particular, emphasized that in order to understand religion, one must learn to live it from within. Hence why, in some passages, Corbin, himself a Protestant, wrote “we, Shiites” and believed that without such methodological identification with the sphere under study, without such immersion into the phenomenology of religious experience, no reliable judgement concerning the religion under study is possible.

Franz Boas’ cultural anthropology and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structural anthropology call for studying archaic societies in a similar manner. Archaic man lives in a phenomenal world qualitatively different from the one in which the man of European Modernity lives. They differ not only on the level of development of logical thinking (as the sociologist and ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl tried to demonstrate), but in the profoundly different organization of the world of phenomena, including taxonomies, the allocation of basic entities, symmetries, and classifications. Lévi-Strauss argued that in archaic tribes and non-literate cultures we are dealing not with a pre-logical type of thinking, but with a different kind of logic that is no less developed than that of European people in Modernity, but is structured around different algorithms and thereby yields different results and gnosiological/ontological systems.

In sociology, an analogous method was employed by Husserl’s student, Alfred Schütz, who proposed to study society by abstracting oneself from the sum of our a priori knowledge of such and any notions of the purported “objectivity” of existing (non-existing) objects of the outside world and their autonomous significance. Different societies, in Schütz’s understanding, operate with different “lifeworld” structures; as follows, they construct different phenomenological systems which at the next stage determine their views of reality, whether internal, external, subjective, objective, etc. Analogous methods were applied by Harold Garfinkel, the founder of “ethnomethodology” who, like Schütz, focused his attention on the “horizons of everyday life” and “practices of everyday life.”

But here is what is interesting: phenomenology as such originally took shape as a philosophical current and was only later applied to other sciences – the phenomenological method was not applied to philosophy itself. Phenomenologist philosophers themselves based their theories on the contemporal moment and, moreover, considered phenomenology to be a more precise and reflective expression of contemporality itself. In its historical movement along the path of scientific process and with its increasing refinement of the methodology of its logical thinking, at one point “European humanity” (Husserl) began developing the sphere of philosophy not in breadth (extensively), but in depth (intensively). This was largely because the expansion of reason had reached its natural borders. This deeper plunge into reason itself is not a step back on the path of singular process in raising the general level of rationality, but a step forward allowing to make those spheres which had previously evaded the arranging and authority of logical procedures into objects of rational attention. Albeit with significant corrections, Heidegger’s philosophy was built in this vein. Philosophical phenomenology, thus, is not only not equivalent to the phenomenology of philosophy, but altogether does not imply the possibility of the latter.

Nevertheless, by making a reverse circle and moving through phenomenological sociology, anthropology, ethnology, and the phenomenology of religion, we can try to apply the phenomenological method to philosophy itself by employing a method opposite to that of deconstruction that reveals the structure of the historial. This is an invitation to perceive this or that philosophical system outside of the context of the history of philosophy, outside of the context of our knowledge about the structure of time, history, reality, the subject and object, and outside of ontology, which we have erected on the basis of the contemporal moment (whether consciously or by inertia). In other words, the phenomenology of philosophy offers the possibility of authentically experiencing the phenomenological basis at the heart of a concrete philosophical Logos, which is taken as a reliable contemporal moment only at a distance from the contemporal moment which constitutes the structure of our philosophical “I.” Thus, an anthropologist immerses himself in the life of an archaic tribe in order to understand its language, its senses, and beliefs from within this life itself, from the experience of being within the tribe, and not from the grounds of superficial comparison with terms, things, practices, meanings, and beliefs which he knows from his personal experience of belonging to modern Western civilization. Since Boas, and especially under the influence of Lévi-Strauss, only field studies grounded in the method of “participant observation”, empathy, and immersion in the phenomenology of the lifeworld of an archaic tribe are considered anthropologically credible. The phenomenology of philosophy should be constructed in a similar way: in order to understand how this or that philosopher thought, it is necessary to trace his thought from the lifeworld to the logical formulation of thought on the high level of logical expression. But this is possible only at a distance from the contemporal moment and its fundamental content, i.e., through the procedure of removing the philosophical identity of the phenomenologist of philosophy. In Heidegger we can see attempts at such a reading of the Greek philosophers and participative immersion into their lifeworld. But the historial in Heidegger supersedes this initiative in full measure, since assigning the pre-Socratics to the First Beginning, and Plato and Aristotle to the end of the First Beginning, forces one to place other relevant doctrines in consciously specified semantic contexts. Heidegger sees the “Greek” and “first beginning” elements in the pre-Socratics on the basis of his reconstruction of the history of philosophy, that is, through performing ontological destruction. Therefore, he also anxiously discarded everything among the Greeks that seemed to him to be “non-Greek” (eastern or oriental – which is clearly evident in his Greece travel journal). In the exact same way, he takes that which does not fall under the “first beginning” among the pre-Socratics (for example, some expressions from Anaximander’s fragments in the likes of the pair of terms γένεσις and φτορά) and attributes such to later contaminations [3]. Furthermore, everything in Platonism which does not fall under his understanding of “finiteness in the First Beginning” – which encompasses no more nor less than the whole scope of “open Platonism”, such as apophatism, the super-essence of the Good in the Republic and the One in Parmenides [4] – is subject to the same censuring. In any case, the level of Heidegger’s self-reflection was so high and transparent that his understanding of the contemporal moment is unprecedented in the profundity of his generalizations of the structure of this moment, which were the most penetrating and convincing (even if their formulation involved his resorting to a certain hermeneutical censorship), and his attempts to immerse himself in Ancient Greek thought were the most successful and authentic among all analogous initiatives.

The phenomenology of philosophy (unlike phenomenological philosophy) proposes that we completely opt out of hermeneutic procedures which presume some starting position (even as a basis for comparison). In clearly accounting for ourselves in the structure of the contemporal moment, in its modernist/postmodernist historial and its Eurocentrism, and in approaching a philosopher or philosophical school separated by time or space from this observatory point, we must effect a radical change in our phenomenological position; we must completely relocate ourselves to a new observatory point where the lifeworld of the person we are studying is situated and from which his ideas and contemplation came. If a philosopher says something about “eternity”, “heaven”, “immortality”, “God”, or “angels”, it follows that such should be understood not in terms of what we know about “time”, the “atmosphere”, the “vacuum”, the “death of God”, or the “naive ridiculousness of faith in angels”, but on the grounds of how this philosopher himself understood, lived, and perceived that of which he speaks. Any discourse on eternity from a human who credibly and absolutely knows (the contemporal moment) that there is no nor can there be any “eternity”, will be perceived either as an allegory, a hyper-exaggerated image, a metaphor, or as a sign without meaning, an empty set. In such a case, one lifeworld (the contemporal) is acting as a judge, prosecutor, and accuser (this is the original meaning of the Greek word διάβολος) of another lifeworld by denying it the right to defend its phenomenological grounds that are completely usurped by contemporaility. If we are capable of logically assessing the arbitrariness of such a loaded approach (explainable through the Nietzschean will to power or Heideggerian Gestell), then the distance from the contemporal moment will take shape on its own, and this means that we are breaking from it and acquiring the ability to embark on a genuine philosophical journey from one observatory point to another observatory point.

The anthropology of philosophy

The case of the anthropology of philosophy is almost the same as that of anthropology. The school of philosophical anthropology of Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, etc., took its roots from Kant’s remarks on the anthropological essence of thinking – which can be considered a new formulation of the sophist Protagoras’ maxim that “man is the measure of all things” – a standpoint which was embedded in the language of modernity. However, philosophical anthropology, as a typical product of the contemporal moment, has nothing in common with the anthropology of philosophy. The anthropology of philosophy proceeds from the plurality of human societies and the diversity of their structures as meaningful outside of any hierarchies or subordinations. Man is a plural phenomenon, anthropology (or at least new anthropology) argues, and the societies built by him reflect this essential plurality which can be studied by comparing them, but they cannot be categorically defined on a quantitative scale of primitive/superior, developed/underdeveloped, rational/irrational, savage/civilized, childishly naive/adultly serious and rigorous. A human belonging to a “primitive” (archaic) society and a human formed in a modern, highly-differentiated society (again, the contemporal moment) are both people in a full sense, and their differences are not amenable to hierarchization into greater/lesser, higher/lower, better/worse. It cannot be said that red is “better” than yellow or that savory is “tastier” than sweet, just as it is impossible to argue that larks are “more perfect” than foxes or whales “more perfect” than sharks. Anthropology draws attention to man as a matrix of the society he creates. Once the structure of a human is different, then societies will reflect these differences and repeatedly refract them in the play of reflections, shadows, and flares.

By applying this principle to philosophy – something which anthropologists and even philosophical anthropologists virtually never do – we acquire a myriad of contemporal moments containing historico-geographical (historico-cultural) positions proper to different philosophers, each of which moments should be studied in their internal logic, harmony, symmetry, and by placing the position of the scholar (and his contemporal moment) in brackets. This approach is the qualification of the anthropologist who studies different (archaic) societies and is obliged for the sake of such to operate with a maximally possible pure experience of understanding culture. At the same time, he must obviously, consciously forbid himself from permitting any projections of his own culture and any hierarchizations or hastily drawn systems of correspondences. But anthropologists deal mainly with cultures that are non-literate and have poorly developed systems of rational self-reflection (Lévy-Bruhl’s principle of “mystical complicity”). Myth, ritual, symbol, sacred rite, and initiation by definition deny transparent rationalization. Hence, the open (emphatic) position of anthropologists is considered here to be at once applicable and justified by the difficulty (or impossibility) of establishing precise correspondences between a rational set and set of para-rational (which does not mean “irrational” or “sub-rational” as were so convinced the 19th century evolutionist anthropologists before Boas and Lévy-Strauss). This principle has not been applied to philosophy insofar as it has been believed that transitioning to a rational system means leaving the sphere of the “para-rational” and the implicit (the mythological, symbolic, and mystical) and entering the sphere of universal self-reflection, where such anthropological operations become irrelevant. Thus, from an anthropological point of view, we are affirming a “measure of things” not simply of man, but of modern Western man, and we are assigning the philosophy which has guided this modern Western man the status of a universal algorithm allowing for the interpretation of all other philosophical systems, both non-modern and non-Western. In the study of archaic cultures, such anthropological suprematism (=cultural racism) was categorically rejected for humanistic, ethical, and scientific reasons. But in the sphere of philosophy, it has been implicitly preserved intact and not subjected to any critical reflection. The modern Western philosopher measures all philosophy (ancient and non-Western as well as modern Western) proceeding from the criteria of the absolute superiority of modern Western philosophy as the cumulative telos for all other systems. At the heart of this lies a mono-polar anthropology based in implicit racism.

At first glance, the impression might be had that applying anthropological methodology to philosophy takes us back to a state of naivety and contradicts the methodology of destruction/deconstruction. This is not so. Deconstruction might very well be an excellent propaedeutic for the anthropology of philosophy since it studies in detail the structure of the context in which this or that philosophical system was created or this or that philosopher thought. If we ignore deconstruction, we miss the most important point of language and the semantic structures of the grammatical field in which a particular philosophy is situated. But by including deconstruction as a method, we must simultaneously subject the contemporal moment itself to deconstruction, i.e., deconstruct that which produces deconstruction, which means once again standing at a distance from the observatory point. Deconstruction forbids naively reading a philosopher without indicating his context and semantic ties. This is the force and significance of deconstruction. But in establishing such context and such links, he who engages in deconstruction is in turn operating with the algorithm of the teleological historial which only allows one to order the field of a text. The historial itself is necessary for deconstruction, and the clearer it is realized, the more reliable the result of a deconstruction. But two positions are permissible to take with regards to the historial: one can be under its suggestive, interpretive influence, i.e., be under it, or one can take a certain distance in relation to it, and apply deconstructive reflection and a particular apperception to it. The second case is an invitation to stand above the historial or outside of it. By not curtailing deconstruction in favor of “new naivety”, and by in parallel with this deconstructing the one engaged in deconstructing, we reach the field of the anthropological method in philosophy. In exploring the philosophy of any philosopher and placing it in a well defined context (deconstruction), we should simultaneously perceive such as something open, excluding from our methodology everything that we know with regards to the future and the past vis-a-vis the observatory point in which the philosopher under study is situated. By knowing in advance the end of the play, we unwittingly apply this knowledge to its first acts. It is this which prevents us from genuinely enjoying the action and turns us from participants in the action into the audience or, in the best case, actors ourselves. What truly delights us is the acting of the actors who force us to forget about how the performance will end and who immerse us in the tension of the dramatic moment. Only in this moment, when we seriously begin to believe that the events in the spectacle might actually go quite differently from what we might know from having repeatedly read the script or seen the production, can we talk about any full effect accomplished. The theater becomes what it originally was – an action, a mystery, a transformative act. This is an open theater, a play whose outcome is known neither by the director, the actors, nor, of course, the viewers.

Applying this metaphor to philosophy, he who carries out deconstruction without deconstructing himself and his actions, can be likened to a person who knows the script well and, over the course of the spectacle, obsessively narrates to his neighbor what is happening and how it will end. Sometimes the skeptical and all-knowing expressions of the audience are enough to simply break the spell of theatrical magic. Such annoying companions are capable of nullifying all the drama of the production. Thus, the principle of the “open theater”, in which the content of the drama at its peak breaks away from the rigid frameworks of the script, can be applied to the open history of philosophy based on the anthropological method. If we knowingly rule out that a philosopher whom we are studying might mean something other than what we know of him in identifying his place in the paradigm of the historial, we render ourselves unfit for a real meeting with him. Yet for some reason we dare to describe this weakness of our own spirit as indicating superiority, greater universality of our position, or in accordance with the rules of ethnocentrism and cultural racism. In behaving so, we forbid ourselves from being surprised, and this means we make ourselves completely unfit for philosophy.

Conversely, in applying the anthropological principle to philosophy, we immediately find ourselves in a complex, saturated, and unpredictable world where surprise can seize us at every turn. This is the open philosophy of history, which a priori recognizes the anthropological dignity of all thinkers, none of whom are considered below us, our contemporal moment, or our observatory point regardless of whether it is modern and Western or non-modern and non-Western. The most consistent representatives of postmodern philosophy are moving in this direction as long as they do not stray from this path towards particularities, towards fascination with minor and obsessive details of liberation strategies which in one way or another retain an inertial connection to the arterial tendency of Modernity’s historial, that tendency which has exerted its teleological (anthropologically racist) influence on Post-Modernity in proposing liberation from the details, but remaining in slavery to the overall picture.

Untergang

Before moving on to Traditionalism as the third strategy for attaining distance from the contemporal moment, it is worth dwelling on how Martin Heidegger, the key figure in the clarification of the historial, understood the vector of time in its Seynsgeschichtliche dimension. Heidegger can be seen as a transitional element between those who recognized the indispensability of the contemporal moment in the spirit of Western European philosophy, and the Traditionalists who, on the contrary, as we will see a little later, offered their version of finding the desired distance. The fact is that Heidegger, recognizing the fatality of time confronting the present and the centrality of the West as the birthplace and place of development of the Logos, deciphered the trajectory of time as “descent”, Untergang, “decline”, “flight of the gods”, and as the “abandonment of being” (Seinsverlassenheit). Herein lies the fundamental difference between Heidegger and the majority of philosophers of Modernity and Post-Modernity who, on the contrary and as a rule, treated history as ascent, accumulation, discovery, and movement forwards and upwards. For Heidegger, the contemporal moment is the point of Midnight towards which we are heading from the evening. He decoded the history of philosophy as a process of descent, decline, concealment, immersion, and oblivion. Thus, his philosophy is profoundly tragic, and its eschatology is paradoxical, for at the moment of maximal darkness, Dasein is supposed to remember its Seyn-Being and decipher the pain of its absence as Gottesnacht, “the night of the gods”, as a call to realize Ereignis, “the Event.” Heidegger saw the telos in the moment of Midnight, in the very center of which the sacrament of Dasein switching its mode of existing from the inauthentic to the authentic must be accomplished.

Such a dualistic attitude towards the contemporal moment as a lower threshold, intended as the point from which begins (or should begin) the return, is, however, problematic, as such is not guaranteed. The return might not begin and, at any rate, such presupposes a perspective opposite to that of the historial which inspired Heidegger’s love for Greek thought and his striving to live and think it along with the very creators of the First Beginning of philosophy. Imagining himself as the one completing Seynsgeschichte, Heidegger felt a deep yearning for those who began such. Thus, distance from the contemporal moment was conquered in parallel to phenomenological destruction, without cancelling or replacing it.

The case of Heidegger is unique in many respects, but what interests us in this situation is that the Beginning of philosophy (from the first to the last phase with Plato and Aristotle) in his specific model of the historial is conceived as a philosophical chord followed by descent, Untergang, which leads to the present, and not vice versa as a “childish” and “long-overcome” phase of philosophy. In this regard, the Ancient Greeks and in particular the pre-Socratics are exalted to unattainable heights. As follows, comprehending them is possible only by degree of radically distancing ourselves from the present through the elevation, the “return”, the επιστροφή of the Neoplatonists.

Heidegger distinguishes the Untergang from those who realize themselves in it and see it for what it truly is – the Untergang. One can be simply fascinated by the flow of history, and one can clearly and penetratingly realize that the movement of the historial is a fall into the abyss. Those who recognize time as falling, Heidegger calls “the descending”, the Untergehende. They, unlike all others, descend consciously, clearly perceiving their endeavor without illusions or fears, although not without horror. For them, the Untergang is the Untergang; they see descent as descent, while all others, not being the “descending”, the Untergehenden, can feed themselves with illusions and methodically rise to the luring and guaranteed horizon of “progress.”

Such an interpretation of the historial as Untergang converges Heidegger with the Traditionalists, whose methods we will now examine.

Traditionalism

The philosophy of Traditionalism [5], otherwise termed Philosophia Perennis or “perennialism”, is of colossal significance to our topic. First established and formulated by René Guénon, this philosophy, as correctly noted by René Alleau, can be considered alongside Marxism the “most revolutionary trend in modern philosophy” [6]. If we approach Traditionalism with due scrutiny, we will soon realize that this comparison with Marxism, albeit paradoxical at first glance, is absolutely justified. The Traditionalists’ appraisal of values is, in a whole number of parameters, far more radical, revolutionary, and uncompromising than the ideas of Marx (as well as those of the other “philosophers of suspicion” among whom Nietzsche and Freud are usually numbered).

Of importance to us at the present moment is how Traditionalism helps establish distance with regards to the contemporal moment and, accordingly, why we have distinguished it as an independent strategy. The very structure of Traditionalist philosophy is in many respects close to that of Heidegger’s, insofar as historical time is understood as a downward movement, degradation, a path to the bottom. The Traditionalists extracted this from religious doctrines and myths (including even from the monotheistic religions), as well as from their analysis of the ontological transformations and changes in the state of the cosmos. However, unlike Heidegger, in Traditionalism the scale of degradation takes on a much more extensive scope and goes far beyond European philosophy. If for Heidegger history is the thread of the Logos stretched between the pre-Socratics and himself as an heir and eschatological figure of German classical philosophy, then for the Traditionalists this period is thought of as only one fragment of descent, of the Untergang, amidst more general and fundamental processes.

For Traditionalists, time itself is a fall, or more precisely, a downward spiral. It has ensnared not only the historical European societies known to us, but the entire destiny of mankind, including the societies of the East and those “mythical” epochs from which only the most hazy legends have remained with us (for example, the legends of Hyperborea and Atlantis). Thus, the contemporal moment is conceived by Traditionalists not as a peak or telos, but as a zone of extreme degradation, a lie, oblivion, and delusion. It is the end of the road to the abyss, the moment of reaching the bottom. Accordingly, the observatory point at which modern humanity (in the era of Modernity and Post-Modernity) stands is not the top of a mountain, but the bottom of the world pit from which nothing can be seen besides dark phantoms and unwieldy fantasies. We live in a world of philosophical hallucinations in which the worse we see, the more we flaunt our foresight. Guénon called this the “reign of quantity” and interpreted it as the critical low of spirit.

Accordingly, Traditionalism completely overturns all the proportions assimilated by default by the contemporal moment:

The time in which we live is an era of total poverty and ignorance. If we base ourselves on its “credibility” and “evidences”, it is impossible to correctly decipher the present, let alone the past which was related to more perfect and authentic periods of history.

The West is the cultural field of accelerated degeneration and decline which surpasses other (non-Western) cultures only in the speed of its fall into the abyss.

The distance in relation to the contemporal moment here is maximal: the West and Modernity are thought of as the worst, the sterile, useless, and false which cannot be taken as any kind of reference point for comprehending anything at all. Thus, modern Western philosophy and its axioms are the worst possible philosophy based on ignorance, a wrong decision in its very basic intellectual operations, and completely delusional with regards to nature, the structure of time, space, man, the world, the primordial, the logic of history, the structure of matter, etc. Modern philosophy is arrogant and lofty nonsense. The only way to break through to philosophy lies in absolutely transgressing the foundational paradigms of Modernity and completely overthrowing the dogmas of modern Western culture, science, values, and political and social systems. All of the West and Modernity’s claims to superiority over the past and non-Western societies are completely groundless and unfounded. The modern West is incapable of understanding even its own relatively recent history (the Middle Ages), not to mention Antiquity or the profound, genuine, authentic, and competent philosophies and systems of the East.

In this operation, the observatory point of modern “Western humanity” flies away, and something directly opposite to such is taken as the starting point: Antiquity and the East, which are genuine observatory points and not simulacra. We are proposed henceforth to think against the present and against the West. Thus unfolds a completely different philosophical map on which the vector of authenticity leads not to the contemporal moment, but away from it as if from a black hole, gathering all the more meaningful and enlightening rays the further it is removed from the “center of hell.” The less Western and modern, the more genuine and authentic, the Traditionalists argue. Insofar as degradation is not limited to the West, but has much larger scale boundaries, the distance from the “black point” of reference must be constantly increased. Everything that remotely resembles “modernity” and the West, even in distant periods of history or outside of the European context, must immediately be treated with suspicion. And if we encounter anything similar in philosophy, culture, politics, society, art, etc., then we should be especially careful, for we are likely dealing with things whose trajectory is sharp and rapid fall into the abyss. The West and modernity are the essence of evil, lies, a dead-end, darkness, madness, violence, suffering, and death. And everything that resembles this, even remotely, by virtue of this very fact is dubious, suspicious, and most likely dangerous.

If modernity denies eternity and invests being in the historial of becoming, this means that only eternity is and represents a reliable basis for understanding the nature of time. There is no vice versa. If modernity insists on space being isotropic, i.e., quantitative, then it is obvious that the truth should be the exact opposite, and the anisotropy and “natural places” of Aristotle determine the structures of “sacred geography” and the laws of climate and the elements. If modernity calls reason and corporeality the unquestionably and prime properties of man, then this is in itself sufficient reason to be sure that the body is insignificant and unbinding, nothing more than “leather garments”, and that reason is nothing more than an empty shadow that has accidentally fallen on the temporary surface from the rays of the true, divine, heavenly mind. If modernity proposes to correlate knowledge with experience, then experience as a measure of the authenticity of science should generally be excluded from consideration, for knowledge is realized through contemplation and based on intellectual intuition which grasps the eidetic essence of things rather than their dead shells and “husks.” And so on and so forth.

In other words, in Traditionalism we acquire an operational and fundamental weapon for realizing the most radical postmodernist strategy. No philosophy is capable of so fundamentally relativizing the contemporal moment and exploding the arrogant claims of Modernity and the West to universalism and the teleologicalness of their philosophy. For Traditionalists, the modern Western philosopher is a guaranteed ignoramus or senseless jester, if not a nihilist possessed by infracorporeal entities.

On the other hand, René Guénon’s follower, the Italian Traditionalist Julius Evola, upon developing this line in his book Ride the Tiger [7], came to a very interesting point: if we take eternity seriously, that is, as it was understood and experienced by the philosophers and thinkers of traditional society, then all the content of history should also, in some sense, exist forever and simultaneously. As follows in Evola’s development of this thought, “modernity” as we know it today, what we call the “contemporal moment”, i.e., “the West + Modernity”, should have been present at previous stages as well. In other words, the modern world and Tradition can be considered not in diachronic order, in which Modernity replaces Tradition over the course of degradation and descent, but synchronically, where they coexist with one another simultaneously, even in space. Thus, the forms of Tradition, the philosophy of Tradition, and the Logos of Tradition represent Heaven, and the forms of modernity the worlds of hell, the underworld, Hades, and Tartarus.

Man, as the cosmic mediator, is situated on the border between both worlds, between Tradition (above) and modernity (below). He is always straddling this border, eternally, in both the era of Tradition’s predominance, and in the periods in which modernity temporarily wins. In his eidetic, eternal dimension, man himself is this border, and the movement of his spirit, his thought, his ways and methods of philosophizing, outline the content of that which lies on either side. Through his choice of orientation, spiritual or corporeal, man constitutes the time, the epoch, the age in which he lives.

Thus, residing in the “dark age”, the Kali-Yuga, is neither a fatality, a punishment, nor something arbitrary, but the Night’s testing of the grain of eternity, of the divine center that comprises the essence of man. In other words, no matter how far away the Golden Age might be, a kernel of it remains within man as hope, as opportunity, as a fulcrum, which can always be found in refusing to unconditionally and fatalistically (or unconsciously) accept the conditions of the Iron Age. Time is an illusion. The historial is no more than a sign, a metaphor that can be deciphered in different ways and appealed to freely. We ourselves choose the time in which we live. And if man is born in the modern world and in the West’s zone of influence, this means that he is included in the profound plans of eternity, and this reflects his mission and fate. Modernity is in Tradition, and Tradition is in modernity. But in different sections of the vertical world, their proportions adjust to being polar: in Heaven (Tradition) there is only a drop of hell (the Biblical serpent that first appeared in paradise), and in hell there is a drop of Heaven. But this is enough to stretch a semantic thread of sacred history, or hiérohistoire (in Henry Corbin’s formulation) between these drops.

Thus, Traditionalism offers such a radical revolution in relation to the contemporal moment, which opens up not only the possibility of establishing the desired distance in one direction, but makes available a whole world of mountain peaks consisting of possible observatory points to be sought in Antiquity and in the East, in traditional society and in religious teachings, everywhere and among all, except the modern West and its philosophers. It bears admission that such an open and substantial philosophical perspective cannot but inspire. It proposes to discover what we ourselves have closed, to dive without skepticism and distrust of religion into ancient philosophy, mythology, traditions and beliefs, both those close (European) and distant (Asian). It is tantamount to a proposal to tear off the blindfold covering our eyes which, contrary to the assurances of false doctors, are fully capable of seeing the light and contemplating a world imbued with eidetic, sagacious rays.

We have thus prepared the basis for our further study into the structures and versions of the Logos. We have outlined what in our vision is the field upon which the main strategies of Noomachy, the wars of the mind, should take place. We have relativized the contemporal moment while leaving the possibility for periodically referencing it with the aim of clarifying its ontological content, its place in the overall construct of the different Logos worlds which we will explore along different axes – both vertical and horizontal, moving freely through times (eons) and spaces (layers of being).

In accord with Tradition, the primordial source, the quintessence, the center of all that is the Mind, the νοὖς of the Neoplatonists, the boddhi of the Buddhists, the Mind is eternal and contains everything at once. This means that it also contains us who think of it, and the world that has unfolded before It (before us) in the process of thinking about it. The world exists to the extent that it is conceived by the Mind. But the Mind, containing everything in itself, also encompasses contradictions, conflicts, falls, and descent. It contains modernity as well. Therefore, upon having rejected and undermined modernity at the very outset of our study, we must also find the latter’s rightful place in it. Truth can truly judge not only truth, but also lies, as well as that which lies between truth and lie: the opinion (δὸξα). Thus, the roots of war, tragedy, catastrophe, and problems must be sought within the Mind. In the Mind must be sought the meaning of the night of the gods and the secret of their flight that comprises the essence of modernity. But it is impossible to participate in the Mind and not be involved in the wars which It wages, which are waged within it. We cannot move towards the Logos and remain indifferent to its internal tensions, its splits and its amalgamations.

Philosophy is a mobilization to the front of the spirit. Resolute and irrevocable. We will devote ourselves and one another to such over the course of the unfolding of our book’s subject matter.

Footnotes:

[1] See paragraph six, “Die Aufgabe einer Destruktion der Geschichte der Ontologie”, in Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), p. 19.

[2] Jacques Derrida, De la grammatologie (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

[3] Martin Heidegger, Holzwege (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1972), p. 296.

[4] See Aleksandr Dugin, V poiskakh temnogo Logosa (Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2013).

[5] See Aleksandr Dugin, Filosofiia traditsionalizma (Moscow: Arktogeya-tsentr, 2002).

[6] René Alleau, De Marx a Guénon: d’une critique «radicale» à une critique «principielle» de sociétés modernes in Les Dossiers H. René Guénon (Paris: L’Âge d’Homme), p. 193.

[7] Julius Evola, Cavalcare la tigre: Orientamenti esistenziali per un’epoca di dissoluzione (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2008).